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# LU OF THE RANGES

BY

ELEANOR MORDAUNT

AUTHOR OF

"THE COST OF IT," "THE GARDEN OF CONTENTMENT," ETC.

LONDON

WILLIAM HEINEMANN





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PART I



## CHAPTER I

FOLD upon fold the forest draped the undulating sides of the Main Ranges, and filled the valley, broken only by an occasional landslip, a splash of tawny earth and rubble, and the disintegrated roots of trees, with a new growth struggling to life above their fallen bodies. Forest myrtles, distorted and moss-grown, mountain-ash, black-butt, and the towering trunks of battalions of white stringy bark; beneath these, a thick growth of peppermint, creeper, and fern. No hint of distance, no sky visible, save directly overhead.

There, in the midst of the forest, lay that deadening world which knows no horizon, where there is nothing to draw the soul upward beyond its own petty confines; no towering peak to climb, no beckoning road, no distant town, the trees pressing too tightly in their stifling phalanx to allow of any possible aspiration.

It was, indeed, one of those places where it is the instinct of human beings to speak in whispers, like the trees among whose half-dried leaves ran an icy south wind; the forerunner of the unfallen snow, which hung a sombre curtain across the yellowish sky.

In the midst of the trees it was almost warm among the huddled trunks. But in the one clearing, which lay on the southern flank of the mountain, the wind licked its way hungrily to earth, and swirled round and round like water in a bowl, beating up into icy waves the waters of a little mountain stream—by the side of which knelt a small girl washing clothes—and driving before it the flame and ashes of the fire that she had kindled.

Racked in every limb by intense fatigue, she rubbed and soaped, with nervous energy, her arms scarlet to the pointed elbows, her pinched little face blue with cold as she bent over

her work, only raising her head for an occasional hasty glance at the threatening sky, then at the garments which she had finished, and which lay spread upon the ground weighted with stones and flapping furiously at their anchorage.

"Lu ! Lu ! Lu-u-u !" The persistent childish wail—beginning in a broken undertone, with pauses for a possible answer, developing into an insistent cry, and rising and falling with a recurrent sense of ill-usage—sounded from the slab hut at the back of the kneeling girl ; but she did not turn her head, though her lips shut in a tight line of pain, while she gave vent to a little snarling sound of impatience.

"Lu !" The cry was shrill, with intense irritation, as the door of the hut swung open, and a boy of two or three years of age appeared on the threshold, his diminutive shirt scarcely reaching below his hips.

"Lu ! I wants you."

"Want away !" muttered the girl, soaping savagely ; then turned her head, while an unwilling tenderness crept into her face at the sight of the small figure which stood shivering in the doorway.

"Look here, my son, you get along back to yer bed, like a good boy. Lu won't be long now, and then she'll come an' make you a nice hot cup o' tea."

"I wants ter get up and come out."

"Well, you can't come out till yer clothes are dry, can you ? It wouldn't be decent." The girl's voice was cheerfully persuasive. "And you sick on the stomach as you were last night. You get along back to your bed. Lu won't be not a brace o' shakes now. You get along, like a good boy."

But the only answer to this exhortation was a repetition of the weary, monotonous cry of a sick child, that scarcely knows what it wants ; and with a muttered:—"Drat that kid !" Lu flung the last little shirt into the tin behind her, and, running to the boy, knelt down by his side, dried his tears with her wet and tattered remnant of a pinafore, and, gathering him up to her flat little breast, staggered into the house, slamming the door behind her.

A few minutes later, with a crash of undergrowth, a boy pushed his way into the clearing, and, walking across to the dying fire, buried his bare toes in the soft, warm ashes at its margin ; peered into the boiling clothes, with an expression



of disgust at finding it contained nothing eatable, whistled loudly; and then, receiving no response, raised his voice in the prolonged querulous drawl of the Australian child.

"Lu! Lu! I saey, ain't the tucker ready? I'm near on famished."

With emphatic haste the door of the hut was flung wide, and the girl, vibrating with eagerness, craned forward over the log step.

"Did you get it?"

"Get what?" The boy's voice was sulky, as he sent the ashes flying in a grey cloud around him.

"The rabbit, o' course."

"No, I didn't."

For a moment the girl drooped; then revived, with a sudden flare of hope. "Yer kiddin' me?"

"'Tain't likely!"

"Weren't there none in none of the traps?"

"No, there weren't."

Lu's hand caught at the lintel of the door. Of a sudden every remnant of youth seemed so completely wiped from both face and figure that a looker-on might have realized he saw her as she would be at sixty years.

"Well, there ain't nothing left but meal; little enough o' that; and the poor kid's stomach turns at the very sight of it."

The two pairs of young eyes met across the dying fire: the girl's momentarily blank with despair, the boy's sullen and resentful.

"'Tain't my fault; I set more nor a dozen traps."

"You did not set them ticklish enough. That's the fault with all you men folk; yer that heavy-handed and slap-dash with all you do. My word! to see the way 'She'd' set a trap. Near thirty to a minute, an' nippy as never was."

For a moment the girl gazed into space, then screwed up her eyes and frowned portentously, as if to hide the tears that had gathered there, while a sudden panic overcame the boy at the sight. He might flout Lu, who was two years his senior, but the fact remained that he had never even thought of her as being at a loss. If she went without anything, it was because she did not want it. If she left anything undone, it was because she chose, not because the doing of it baulked her.

Besides, the boy realized that she was the only one left for

him to turn to—that it was upon her narrow shoulders, not upon his, that the mantle of dominion had fallen. And that Lu—the one staple and sure element remaining in his life—should cry, or look like crying, threatened a fresh upheaval.

“A’right ; I’ll go along an’ have another try arter—arter dinner.” The boy’s voice trailed off into a tentative undertone upon the last word.

“Dinner !” Lu snorted. “Now, look here, Harold Tempest, didn’t I tell you this very morning that I wouldn’t let you inside that there door till you brought back something ? And now the day half gone, an’ you come here asking me for dinner, as pert as pert !”

The boy snuffled, all his aggression gone ; and again the girl suddenly relented.

“Poor kid ! I suppose it ain’t your fault. Luck do seem dead against us. Now I tell yer what. You take them clothes out of the tin, and rinse ’em, and lay ’em out tu dry, an’ I’ll see what I can do. There’s a bit of meal left, and I’ll boil it up, and give you the scrapin’ out o’ the molasses tin if you’re a good boy. I was keepin it’ fur Win, only he didn’t seem not to fancy it. Kids are like that when they starts with their second teeth.” Lu’s tone was lofty. The tiny Winthorpe’s constant fretful cry and fever-bright eyes, the harsh dry touch of his skin, baffled her. But she was too good a general to acknowledge defeat. And if it was not teeth—as she more than half suspected—Harold knew no better than she did. “Now you get to work.” The doubt tugging at her heart rendered the eye she fixed on her brother doubly stern. “You do as I tell you, then you’ll see what’s what.”

“A’right.”

In a listless fashion the boy began fishing out the boiling linen at the end of a stick, shaking it to and fro to cool, spreading it on the ground, and kicking a stone on to each piece. He ignored Lu’s direction that it should be first rinsed—for the stream looked cruelly cold—fervently hoping that she would not notice the omission, though in his heart of hearts he knew better. Lu noticed everything, and the moment she opened the door to see how he was getting on she realized that the garments were still steaming in the cold air.

“Yer ain’t not rinsed them, you young larrikin ! What did I tell yer ? Now you just——” And she sprang forward

to cuff him into obedience, with the free, wild movement that marked her out as a denizen of the woods, despite her tattered garment of civilization. Then she suddenly paused, with the same air of collapse which had overcome her on realizing that the young hunter had indeed returned empty-handed.

"Oh, leave 'em." She turned and stumbled up the rough step to the house, then glanced round at the boy, who, rendered more uneasy by her sudden quiet than by any onslaught, stood sheepishly rubbing his bare foot on the ground. "Come along in; it don't not matter; nothing matters. Good Lord! An' to think I've not even blued 'em!"

The inside of the hut was full of smoke from a sulkily burning fire of hardwood, all that was left from the pile of ready-split logs; for hardwood—which burns but sullenly without something more resinous to help it out—is the last resort of the bush housewife. It was also full of innumerable cold winds, having been built by a new chum of unseasoned timber, each slab of which was by now so warped and distorted that the walls were cut by gaping cracks, through which Lu delighted, lying in bed on summer nights, to watch the stars. In the winter it seemed as though the wind became visible, casting a waving presence between earth and sky; but in the summer they showed clearly, and she loved them, as she loved the scent of the night, the pungent peppermint and gum, the sweet breath of the earth, the utter cleanliness of it all. For to the girl's mind the stars, twinkling in the deep indigo sky, were the very cleanest things that she had ever seen, clean as the night itself; and cleanliness was a fetish with her, a passion she never lost; though later the night grew to seem, of all things, the farthest removed from the quality that she so loved.

At one side of the single room of the hut stood a wide, old-fashioned, double bed, neatly made, covered with a red-and-white counterpane, the top sheet turned down with the most exact precision. At the other, a straw palliasse lay on the floor, where the three children slept; and there Winthorpe sat very upright, his tiny hands pressed down either side of him, whimpering incessantly and calling for Lu; though by the time the elder boy entered the hut she was kneeling by his side, carefully stirring something round in a cup.

"My! but ain't he red! I don't see what fur you're in such a taekin' about that kid. Why, look at the colour on 'im!"

"Teeth, idiot!" Lu leant forward and put her arm round the little figure. "Lu's here, precious. Lu won't never leave her boy."

The child shivered, and she dragged up a corner of the rug round his shoulders.

"See what lovely gruel Lu's got! Now look, an' she'll stir it round with her finger, an' make it all sweet. Open yer mouth, honey-bird. Open yer mouth, now, this moment, or Harold 'll have it!" The girl's hard twang was gone; every vowel she uttered seemed to round off the words with love, despite the imperative tone in which she couched the last sentence.

With a peevish cry the child pushed away the cup, and half the carefully prepared mess of meal and water fell over the girl's hand. Without moving her encircling arm she wiped it as best she could, and recommenced her pleading, but the boy did not appear even to hear her.

"I wants ter get up an' come out; I wants ter get up, Lu, Lu, Lu!" And he would have struggled to his feet had she not enfolded him with both arms.

"Lu's here, precious. It's too cold for him to go out. Lu 'll bide along o' her boy."

"Looks as though he were off his nut:" volunteered Harold, sullenly aggressive, as is the way with all his kind, in the face of any half-understood pain or emotion. Glad of any outlet, the girl turned upon him savagely.

"Ain't yer got nothing better to do nor to stand jawing there? Make haste and get yer dinner. D'yer think I'm goin' to have dirty crocks littering about all hours o' the day, an' no knowin' who may drop in!"

The boy glanced dubiously at the plate and spoon that lay in stark loneliness upon the table. "I don't see no——" he began.

"See! Can anyone see through the side o' a billy? Yer porridge is there on the fire. Help yerself, and for goodness' sake get a move on you."

As he lifted the tin from the fire she girded at him. "Expectin' me ter get up an' wait on you, with this kid's gums



in the state they are. Wait on you ! Ain't that like all mankind ? An' the wonder is that they can find their way ter their own mouths."

Harold helped himself clumsily. "Take it all ?" Lu nodded, and he stared.

Winthorpe's illness, his strange way of speaking, his persistent refusal of food, seemed to hang an air of unreality over the place ; and now here was Lu starting off on the same tack.

"Ain't you goin' ter have none ?"

"Not likely, when I've only just 'bout finished my breakfast," declared the girl, though her eyes were wolfish as she looked steadily away from him, while he ladled out the remainder of the mess upon his plate.

"The 'lasses tin's on the shelf."

"I ain't no way set on yer dirty old 'lasses," answered the boy, with an effort which was almost heroic.

"Oh, get it, an' stop blowing. Though I will say this much fer you, you ain't a bad kid at times, as kids go." And her eyes rested on him with affection, as he scraped out the tin, while she rocked her body gently to and fro, patting Winthorpe, whose more strident complaints were dying away in a sleepy murmur.

After a while he really slept, and, laying him down, Lu covered him with a rug ; then moved over to the table, and stood with her hands upon it, her body bent at the shoulders like that of an old woman, sombrely regarding the boy, who had raised his plate in both hands and was licking the last morsel from round the edge.

"What did you have fur yer breakfast, Lu ?"

"That's tellin'."

"I didn't see yer have none."

"Did you ever hear of women havin' their breakfast till the men folk was done muckin' round ? Don't you worry about what I had fur my breakfast, son. What the eye don't see the heart don't grieve over, and if you'd seen what I had fur my breakfast you might be gettin' jealous." And she gave a harsh, dry laugh at the boy's puzzled face ; the next moment, however, Harold's thoughts were busy with more personal matters.

"I could do with a bit more o' that there tack ;" and he jerked his thumb in the direction of the empty billy.

"There ain't none." The last flicker of sinister humour had disappeared from Lu's face.

"It don't take no maekin', an' the kettle's on the boil."

"There ain't no more." She repeated the words monotonously, but they held the sound of fate.

"What?" The boy's face was distorted with anxiety. All his life he had been given enough to eat, but only enough. Food did not flow, like it does for richer children, as naturally the wind blows and the sun shines. It had been the subject of much cogitation and talk: the one thing worth thinking of; the one thing to be striven for, snared, shot, or bartered; the outcome of superior skill or constant endeavour.

But to be without it! Suddenly it seemed to the boy that everything in life had grown out of proportion. The mountains and forests had appeared mere everyday, unimportant facts, as much part of his home as are the bricks and mortar of an actual house to the town-bred child. But now it seemed that they had shrunk to a prison, with wall of impenetrable thickness, in which, by the cruel selfishness of others, he had been incarcerated. A medley of confused thoughts surged through his slow brain.

"They didn't not aught ter 'a' gone an' done it!" He knew he was uttering treason. But he did not care; a dull feeling of resentment burnt through him, dimming his light eyes, thickening his freckled skin. "They didn't——" he began, and would have repeated the words again, had not the girl, leaning across the table, with one of her swift, panther-like movements, caught him a sharp box on the ear.

"There you are! That's what ye'll get if I hear any more o' that talk! What have I learnt yer in yer catechism about honouring yer father an' yer mother? Now tell me that, Harold Tempest—you as hasn't got gumption enuff ter snare a rabbit.

"Now then, I'll 'bout tell you what you can do in place o' crabbing your elders and betters," she went on. "You can jist take yourself along out an' get a rabbit, and not show your face here till you've got it, neither." And, seizing the boy by the shoulder, she propelled him towards the door, kicking it open with her foot.

But once on the steps she snatched him back, apparently as anxious lest he should escape her as, a moment before, she had been to see the last of him.

"It's come!" There was a jubilant note in the boy's voice. Here at last was something he could understand, something that belonged to his own world. But Lu—staring in front of her, with white set face, at the thickly falling snow; the yellowish light, and the trees which now stood motionless in the still air—did not appear even to hear him.

"What a lark!" Harold capered, snapping his fingers with delight. "Lucky my sled's still in the shed. What a time I'll have!" he cried. But with a sudden fierce movement Lu pushed him back into the hut.

"Go back! Do you hear me? Go back!"

"What are you gettin' at? I won't play the wag, word o' honour, Lu! Why, the snow wouldn't be no good for sledging afore to-morrow."

"Go back, I tell you; you shan't go." Lu knew and dreaded the snow; so seemingly innocent, and yet so remorseless in its utter defacement of all the tracks that man and beast had padded out for themselves through the soft, deep mud of the forest. Besides, during the last few weeks, she had seen three others go forth without returning, and a sudden panic seized her.

"Go back!" she repeated; "you'll not set foot outside the door. Do you hear me? Go back!"

"There's nothing to eat."

"That's none o' your business. Go inside and make up the fire while I get in the clothes."

Sheepishly the boy did as he was bid, awed by Lu's air of concentrated command, and the steadily pointed finger which she did not drop till the door was again shut; when, turning, she began to gather up the stiffening linen, the patched and frayed browns, blues, and ochres, already laced over by large, open flakes of snow.

Wearing old loose shoes, every time the girl stooped she showed a heel purple with chilblains, which stung like burns; while a gnawing pain in her middle made everything appear unreal. Indeed, as she stretched out her hand for the clothes, she was surprised that it actually touched them—that they were there at all, and not a mere illusion, so unnatural did her surroundings seem to have grown. Her head was light with want of food. She felt curiously elated, as if she wanted to laugh; and yet with the thought of laughter came the desire

for tears ; while her throat was stiff and strained, every muscle like a bar of iron.

A veritable child of the bush, she was inured alike to heat and cold, to hard work and a spare diet, to an almost incredible isolation. But now loneliness had, for the first time, become tangible, while appetite had grown to starvation—a creature of giant strides, with huge, tearing hands. The cold bit to the very bone, and as she moved to and fro in the little clearing the girl muttered to herself from between her clenched teeth :—“ My God !—oh, my God ! ” as a very old woman might have done. For the children of the bush are above all things old, like the primitive forms of vegetation, the wistful-eyed, prehistoric animals which are their fellows. When they grow up, and find their way to the cities, they blossom into a splendid youth, which never again quite leaves them ; or else, scared and bewildered, creep back again to the wild places from whence they came. But to the irresponsible gaiety of childhood they are for ever strangers.

As the girl opened the door of the shanty once more she heard Winthorpe’s voice, raised in a shrill scream of fear.

“ Lu, they’s tumbling ; Lu ! Lu ! They’s tumbling on Win’s head. Lu ! ”

Letting her armful of linen fall to the floor, Lu dropped on her knees and clasped her little brother, who—with starting eyes and scarlet face, overcome by that inexplicable fear of falling skies which haunts the delirious child—was standing upright on the palliasse, and rocked him to her heart. Then, as his cries softened to a definite demand for water, held the cup Harold brought her to his lips, and, finally lying down by his side, folded him in her arms, lest any sudden movement should awake him to fresh terrors.

## CHAPTER II

ONCE more the wind rose ; thin ridges of snow drifted in between the slabs of wood, and melted in the warmth of the room. The girl was so incredibly wearied with hunger and anxiety that she dozed again and again within an hour, rousing at last sufficiently to call—with a sense of some tre-



mendous effort—to Harold, who sat on a low stool in front of the fire, his elbows on his knees, staring into the embers.

“Kick off yer boots, my son, an’ come in along o’ us.”

But the boy shook his head. “Not yet; I’m sort o’ thinkin’.” His voice was heavy with the effort of his slowly moving brain.

Once more Lu dozed; opening her eyes again to see that her brother had risen, and, standing with his back to the open grate, was regarding them both with a look of sullen defiance.

“They didn’t ought ter ‘a’ gone an’ done it,” he said; and though he spoke almost beneath his breath, there was no hint of fear in his drawling tones.

For once Lu did not retaliate, only gazed at him dully from above the top of Winthorpe’s yellow head, which lay beneath her chin, pressing more heavily each moment into her bony little chest. She realized that the time was past for petty fault-finding or resentment; that life had grown so awful that no words and very few actions—save by the direct intervention of Heaven—could ever again matter: though she caught her breath in horror at what happened next. For, kicking off his boots, with his eyes steadily averted from the place where she lay, Harold turned back a corner of the clothes on the big bed, crawled into it, pulled them up close beneath his chin, and lay on his back, staring straight in front of him, till his eyelids drooped and his regular breath told Lu that he slept.

After a while Winthorpe moved, and, dragging herself cautiously to her feet, she unfastened the door, and, opening it a crack, peered out. But she could see nothing beyond a thick blur of white immediately in front of her eyes. The snow was still falling, and the desperate hope which had been taking shape in her mind—that by essaying track after track she might, in time, win her way to the town and bring help—was gone; for the tracks themselves were lost, and the only chance of life now lay in the fact that the snow might bring the trappers.

The girl had no idea how long life might be supported without food; but something must happen. She could not lie down and die; she could not let the others die. Indeed—prematurely old as she was—she was still too young for the thought of death to hold any personal meaning. Her father and mother were both gone; but it was not death that had

taken them. Death was, as yet, for others. And, closing the door and putting a fresh log on the fire, she sat down by it ; every pulse in her head hammering with an agony of thought. A way out must be found, and she was the only one to find it. Harold slept peacefully in the big bed ; Winthorpe, tossing and moaning, still slept. That was the way of men : for the women remained the vigil, the ceaseless planning and scheming.

It had been thus with Lu's mother ; full of eager aspirations and passions ; irritated to desperation by her husband's phlegmatic ways. All the arrangement for the good of the little family had rested on her shoulders ; sufficient for him the satisfaction of the mere bodily needs of each day.

As if in a panorama, all the events of the past months unfolded themselves before the child. As far back as she remembered anything, she remembered her mother's anxiety to return to the town where she belonged ; to have her children taught, decently clothed, and civilized ; the sense of something rash and desperate. never at rest for ever beating out its wings against the limitations of life. The scenes of wild revolt and recrimination, through which her father had sat over the fire smoking, in silence and apparent unconcern. It had all been a familiar and expected part of Lu's everyday life.

Then at last, memorable and distinct from the rest, there had come a spring of soft warm winds, when the woman had grown thin and hectic, her dark eyes set like coals in her face ; followed by a summer of heavy, brooding heat, during which she had hardly moved from the house, save to wander restlessly to the door, stare up at the one open space of sky, and then return to her seat by the empty hearth.

It was after this summer, during a wild, wet autumn, that Joe had come to be her father's mate during the winter trapping season, sleeping in the lean-to with the old grey mare.

And then it was that for Lu, sensitive to every breath of human emotion, the atmosphere of the slab hut began to be shot by some new and vibrant quality. The boys adored Joe ; but to Lu he was hateful. She loathed his bright, dark eyes, his white teeth, his whole personality, and never spoke to him unless it was absolutely necessary ; while to touch him, even to brush the sleeve of his coat in passing, set her trembling. She would have fought him if she had dared ; but for

the first time in her life she feared her mother, with a child's instinctive fear of what is strange. For this new mother—who flushed and paled like a girl; who puffed out her hair at either side of her face; who laughed and sang over her work, radiating an inexplicable warmth—was strange to the girl; while she lacked courage to attack the man. Besides, what was there for her to fight against? The indefinable thread of mutual understanding which vibrated between the two; the inexplicable distance to which she—once her mother's closest comrade and confidante—had been pushed. It was all so intangible, she might as well have fought with the air.

And then one day, after a long winter, and apparently endless summer, weighted—even to the girl's innocent mind—by a heavy atmosphere of passion, Joe had packed up his belongings, humped his swag, and departed; followed by the clamorous lament of Harold and baby Win.

Even then Lu had not dared to rejoice. Something in her mother's undiminished gaiety and mocking regret, at the back of which lay a feverish sense of rapture, warned the girl. To her mind the thread which bound the two was still vibrant. And her instinct was not at fault; for in another week her mother had gone too. And, returning next day from some splitting, at the farther side of the mountain, her father, blind with fury, had harnessed the old white mare to the sulky—fitted with runners, so that it might pass with equal ease over the snow or the mud of the timber tracks—and set off to follow the wife, whom he had loved in his selfish, inarticulate way, and the man who had deceived him. Followed on and on. Driven forward from each bush hotel by the news that they had passed that way: his rage, and utter forgetfulness of his children's need, rendered more complete by the potions of bush whisky, fiery with an admixture of chopped tobacco and kerosene, with which each publican had in turn administered consolation.

Followed on and on, till at last the city—which he only reached in time to hear that the fugitives had sailed for the West—engulfed him: drowning him in a sea of drink and delirium. Where his wife and children were long remembered, at certain periods in his cups, as the blighting factors in a blighted career; or, if he could chance on any new listener—an excuse for drinks, for which another man paid.



But as far as Lu was concerned, the face of the world had changed from the evening when she arrived home from trap-setting with Harold, and found little Winthorpe alone in the empty house. For the memory of her father's rage, the last sight of the swaying sulky—disappearing down the maze of narrow tracks—represented to her a mere epilogue: a feeble copy of the tragedy which, once for all, cut away from under her feet the very small sense of irresponsibility and childishness that she had ever known.

### CHAPTER III

THROUGH the labyrinth of the forest—an eternal twilight, rendered dimmer than ever by the canopies of snow, which now lay spread across the flat tops of the trees, in a curious contrast of white and green—a solitary man made his way; his keen eyes noting each twisted bough, each gnarled trunk, the position of each small hollow or hillock which spoke to him of the buried track.

At his heels slouched a dreamy-eyed, rough-coated roan horse, hung at one side with an immense bundle of gaping canvas, disclosing cooking-pots, and tins of food, and books; and at the other with a sack of meal; while it was topped by the typical swagman's roll of blankets and waterproof sheeting; and, moreover, hung round with a variety of traps of all sorts, till it resembled nothing less than the horse on which the White Knight rode to fame; while it followed every turn and twist taken by its master with a curiously mincing step, that felt uneasily at the uneven ground, lying beneath the thin coating of snow.

The man was dressed in a rough brown Norfolk suit, of unmistakable English make, with boots that reached to the knee, and a soft cap with flaps to tie over his ears, and another flap at the back to keep the snow from running down his neck. He carried a gun, while his rather short, square person was belted round with an old-fashioned cartridge belt; apparently, however, he was not, at that moment, in search of game, for his whole attention seemed to be concentrated on the trees, some of which he actually addressed as old friends, patting their white sides, from which the bark hung in

shreds ; or pulling at the fibrous tissues which lie between the bark and body of the gum-tree, much as one might pull with gentle affection at the coat of some beloved dog.

“ Three stringy barks, and a hard wood. Then, at right angles, one myrtle and a clump of peppermints. A ring-barked white gum ; three iron-bark, with another white stringy bark to the left ; and a black-butt, split down the middle.”

He was moving more slowly each moment, reiterating over to himself the landmarks that he remembered so well.

“ One black-butt, split down the middle,” he repeated ; and stopped, evidently at fault, tapping gently on his chin with his woollen gloved hand.

The black-butt was gone ; and so, he saw as he peered ahead, were other prominent trees on which he had counted ; for the splitters had been in that part of the forest since the last winter, and there were wide gaps where many of his landmarks had once stood.

At that moment, however, the roan stumbled ; and, kicking the snow away from the stump on which it had caught its foot, he found it to be that of a black-butt.

“ So far, so good. *Allons !* The open road is before us !” he remarked grandiloquently, and pushed on for awhile with renewed decision. But the short afternoon was fading, while the depredations of the woodmen became more and more evident ; till at last, taking off his cap to wipe his forehead—for, in spite of the snow, or perhaps because of it, the air of the forest was close—he owned himself completely at fault.

“ There’s only one thing for it, my friend ”—he spoke to his horse, which laid back one ear and thrust its nose over his shoulder—“ we must camp ; there’s no chance of making the hut to-night. However, we’ve got to find the clearing first, for it’s not wholesome sleeping under trees with this weight of snow and leaves ; so vamoose, old fellow,” he added. And thus, peering from side to side in search of an open space, they pressed on in the rapidly thickening gloom ; the horse lifting its feet higher than ever, and giving vent to uneasy whinnies when its master momentarily vanished behind some tree-trunk.

Suddenly, however, they both stopped ; the man first, then the roan, throwing back its head with a snort of surprise.

For in the shadow of a huge hollow gum, blackened by fire, there knelt a girl, busy disentangling a trap, which, to judge by the familiar click of a released spring, had been set in vain.

So engrossed was she in the business in hand, or so completely had the snow deadened their footsteps, that the traveler had time to notice the pile of empty traps at her side ; the red chapped hands ; the sharp elbows ; and the deep hollows under the brow, bent in a heavy frown above her work.

Even then it was evident that, until he spoke, the child did not in the least realize that she was not completely alone.

"What luck, mate?" The words were ironic, for the want of luck was only too palpable.

But Lu Tempest took no notice of what was said. The mere sound of a human voice was enough, running through every vein like wine, setting each nerve in her body tingling from head to foot.

Flinging herself back upon her heels, she started up at the man, her face bone white in the twilight, her eyes blazing in their deep hollows. Orde laughed ; he had met children like this before ; wild creatures of the bush, who had never seen a human being outside their own family.

"Well, young woman ! Doubtless I appear to you as mysterious as Sylvanius, deity of woods and forests ; or—greater still, Jove himself, new descended from a cloud. And 'tis said that human wonder feeds the mind. However, the divinity in me is easily contented ; and at present humanity is uppermost, demanding a camping place and nutriment—to put it more plainly, in the vernacular of your country—tucker."

"We ain't got no food." The girl's voice was flat and toneless ; and, stooping nearer, the trapper noticed the tight skin strained above the bony structure of the face, and the eager expression of the eyes, such as one sees in some small, wild animal, long imprisoned in a half-forgotten trap.

"By God ! the creature's starving !" he thought ; then added aloud :—"I've actual food, enough and to spare. No need to beg the devil for the loan of a cook, either—thanking God who made me a Jack of all trades. But the fire's the thing. Every scrap of wood's soaked through, and we must find a place to camp," he said. But by this time Lu was on her feet, her hand gripping his arm.

"We're starving !" Her voice was hoarse and cracked.

"So it appears ; but who's ' we ' ?"

"The children an' I." She threw out her hands with a little gesture of impatience. "If you have food, we'll pay you back—when they come home."

Orde plunged one hand into the pocket of his coat, and, bringing out a large ship's biscuit, offered it to the girl, who flew at it, caught it with both hands, and involuntarily set her teeth in it, like a squirrel ; then hesitated, and jerked back her head sharply.

"It's not enough ; it's no good. There are three of us ; we need flour an' meat an' meal."

"Look ! I'll make a bargain. Give me a lodging for the night, and a fire to cook by, and we'll share our supper—talk things over. What say you ?"

"Come !" The girl had her hand again on his sleeve ; he felt the nervous fingers grip through the three thicknesses of wool that he wore. "It's not far, not three minutes' walk from here ; there's plenty o' wood, an' the fire's all ready."

It seemed as though she did not dare to loose him for a moment, lest he should vanish ; but pulled on a space in front, winding her way—with the dexterity of long use—among the crowded trunks, dodging the mass of undergrowth, twisting so sharply round unexpected corners that his foot caught in the outstanding roots ; while more than once he was forced to hold her back, with a firm hand on her bony shoulders, lest his horse should be left behind.

During one such enforced pause, in which he could feel her vibrating with impatience, she held up the biscuit which she still clutched. "You're sure you have more ?"

The pointed face peering up at him through the dusk caught his nod, and in a moment was thrown forward upon the dry morsel ; while he could hear her crackling it between her teeth, and swallowing it with the gulping sounds made by a hungry animal ; and wondered what could have happened to bring a child to such a pass, and who were "they" of whom she spoke, as if likely to return at no very distant date ; though he would ask no question, knowing as well as any man that forced confidences lack all colour, and are not worth the having.

At last the trees ended ; and, with a breath of relief at the freshened air, the man was dragged forward into a clearing ;



looked back a moment to be sure that his horse was following, and then allowed himself to be drawn towards the dark bulk of a hut, which—for the sake of security from falling trees—had been placed in the very centre of the open space.

Stumbling up the steps in breathless eagerness, never loosing his arm for a moment, the girl pushed open the door. "He has food:" she said; and the words, uttered without any preamble, were pregnant with meaning; for when one is sufficiently hungry, all else ceases to matter. But, having spoken, she ran to the palliasse which lay on the floor, and, dropping to her knees, with a dry sob, passed her arm beneath Winthorpe's neck.

"The man has food—food, dear one. Lu's boy shall have a cup of nice tea now, with sugar, an' he'll soon be well. Win, Win! Here's Lu come back: smile at her. What have you been doin' to him, Harold? What have yer been doin' ter him?" And she flung round upon the elder boy, who had risen from his seat by the fire, and was staring at the stranger, taking no notice either of his sister or her words, till she flew at him, and shook him by the arm. "He's worse nor when I left. What have yer been doin' ter him?" But the lad pushed her aside without answering, and, drawing a little nearer to Orde, opened his mouth as if to speak, gazing at him through the smoke-dimmed atmosphere—heavy with the curious acid scent of sickness—as if spellbound.

Glancing at him for a moment, Orde realized the slow mind behind the half-open mouth; realized also that the boy's face, with the freckles standing out upon it in vivid contrast, was bone white like the girl's. Then, turning his attention to the child on the mattress, saw that he was flushed crimson, with puffed eyelids, and dark, cracked lips.

"We're starvin'!" The words came at last, as the elder boy clutched him by the arm. "They left us. They didn't aughter gone an' done it," he muttered. And Julian Orde—to whom all human emotions and their origin were as music—seeing the girl's eyes flash round with a sudden flame of resentment, wondered again what it all meant.

"My horse is outside," he said, "a veritable peripatetic store. Only show me somewhere that I may put him, then I can unfasten my swag, and we will sup; failing eggs for an omelette, we will try a damper—the pastoral damper."

"There is Dapple's stable and fodder: I'll show you." The boy moved forward with eagerness, though he put out one hand to steady himself, first on the table, then on the lintel of the door. "Dampener and tea—and meat?" his lips snapped hungrily.

Orde nodded; and he gave vent to a sudden, shrill laugh of excitement. "I'm all belly! There's nothing more o' me, as if I were all open in front. I couldn't not get out ter the traps; an' there was nothing more—it is three days!" He stumbled down the steps, caught at the roan's bridle, and pushed his shoulders against the door of a lean-to. "This is the stable—there's hay"; and, thrusting an armful beneath the animal's nose, he fumbled eagerly at the knots of the pack.

Back in the hut Orde sent the boy to fill the billy at the stream; and, putting it on the fire, mixed dampers of flour and water, and laid them in the embers; then mingled a little crumbled biscuit and water for the lad, who seized it with an expression of dismay at the small quantity. "I could eat a house!" he declared, and repeated his former phrase—"I'm all belly." But after the first mouthful or so he sickened, and laid down the spoon, with a look of piteous disappointment.

"All right, my son. Go slowly, a little at a time. You'll feel better after a drink of tea." Orde nodded reassuringly; then mixed another cupful, and knelt beside Lu, who was still crouched over the mattress: "Now drink this."

"Him first."

"I doubt whether he will take it. Here, shift for a moment, and I will see what I can do." And, slipping his arm beneath the child's figure, he raised it, till the yellow curls lay over his heart. "Poor little warrior! he's started his fight for life early. Now, my girl, you take the spoon, and I'll open the little fellow's mouth; slowly though."

But the food was all spilt, in spite of Lu's care, dribbling out at the corner of the boy's mouth; for though he had long ceased any loud complaining, he moved his head incessantly from side to side with a low moaning sound.

"How long has he been without food?"

"He had a sup yesterday—I soaked a corner of the meal-bag; but he ain't not fancied anything, not for days. It's teeth, that's what it is. Them second teeth is awful slow in coming."



Sitting back on her heels, the girl's eyes challenged the man, and he nodded assent to her words. For though Julian Orde knew enough to realize that this child was at one of those rare periods in life, when the teeth give little or no trouble; he also—and it was the worse for him—knew as much about women as any man living. Knew that, while the man and boy are distinct and separate beings, the woman springs to life in each girl-child from the very moment of birth; as complete as Minerva from the brain of Jove, fully equipped in all feminine wiles and caprices. Above all, fixed in her most unchanging characteristic—an assumption of knowledge, and dislike to any shadow of contradiction on subjects of which she is most profoundly ignorant; though at the same time professing a complete ignorance of other matters, regarding which she possesses that almost diabolical instinct which stands to a woman in the place of brains. This according to the creed of Julian Orde. Besides, what would the word “meningitis,” which flashed through his mind, have conveyed to the bush child, beyond a new fear?

“Doubtless it is—as you sapiently remark—teeth. In any case, he is better with very little at a time till the fever goes. You have no milk?”

“He were weaned more than a year back.” There was a savage hauteur in the girl's voice. Tinned milk, expensive to buy, and heavy and bulky to transport, was an unknown luxury up there in the heart of the bush; in addition to which Tempest—who did not care for milk—saw no reason why his wife or children should desire a luxury which he himself could do perfectly well without; while in all her life Lu had never seen a cow, or even a milch goat. But she remembered her mother feeding Win at the breast; and only the night before, when Harold was asleep, had sat up in bed and examined her own breasts, with a feeling of passionate rage at their dryness in this hour of need. The only reason for which, having reached one of those inexplicable gaps that are to be found in the knowledge of even the most precocious child—she believed to lie in the fact that she was like Hagar, accursed of God. And now this stranger demanded milk!

“Well, I've plenty of condensed stuff, and he's welcome to that:” remarked Orde, wondering again what false note he had inadvertently touched upon. “But it seems to me that

the best thing would be to give the little chap a hot bath. You have mustard ?" The girl nodded with an odd twist of her mouth, which said, more plainly than words, that it was pretty well all they did have. " We must put a cold bandage round his head. And have you any scissors ? We'll get some of those curls off."

" I'll not have his curls touched ! Mum would never have his curls cut." Lu's tone was aggressive ; but Orde took no notice, and, drawing his handkerchief from his pocket, beckoned to the elder boy.

" Go outside and put a handful of snow in it. " Now "—and he turned again to the girl—" get me those scissors."

For a moment their eyes clashed : his, half closed, a little scornful, a little amused, but quite determined ; hers blazing defiance. " Do you hear ? Do you want the child to die ?" His tone was so cold and brutal that suddenly the girl's courage evaporated, and, fetching a pair of scissors from the mantel-shelf, she thrust them into Orde's hands ; then, catching the soft yellow ringlets in her apron, gathered them together in a rag of a handkerchief, thrust them into her bosom ; and, fetching a towel, helped the stranger to fasten it tightly over the snow-sopped bandage with which he encircled the small shaven head.

## CHAPTER IV

It was the beginning of a fight that was new to Orde, one of the few experiences left to him, and he seized on it with avidity. He had fought for his own life—at times hand over hand : every day as it passed, like a man who climbs a rope. He had fought for love, for recognition, for prominence, first in one thing, then in another ; but never as he fought now for this child's life.

It lasted for three days and three nights. A primitive fight, with no real knowledge to back it ; the only weapons, two indomitable wills, snow, hot water, mustard, raw eucalyptus and castor oil—the one medicine he had with him.

Time ceased to exist. There was no longer any night or day, only intervals between the different remedies—from the last hot bath or snow bandage until the next.

The hut grew to seem an absolute world, from which the

snow-clad mountains and forests were completely alien. There was always the fire : Lu toiling to and fro with water, or sitting back on her heels watching Winthorpe, and following every movement Orde made with fierce anxiety ; the monotonous moan of the sick child : the soft crash of a breaking log upon the hearth.

Then, on the evening of the fourth day, came a change. The boy ceased the incessant sound which had eaten its way into their brains, and lay quiet, with little beads of moisture pricking out upon his skin.

Suddenly Orde began to feel bored. The ardour of the fight was over. Loosed from the strain at which it had been fixed, his mind sprang from point to point ; he must be going, settle into his hut, get to work.

For the first time he went to bed, stretching himself out at Harold's side. All through the fight for Winthorpe's life the boy had done as he was bid ; but he never once volunteered his help ; sitting by the fire hour after hour—his elbows on his knees, his chin in his hands—gazing into the embers. Between sleeping and waking Orde realized his attitude for the first time.

"He is brooding over something," he thought ; "and will brood over it till the day of his death. He is one of those inarticulate natures which are so near to the earth that any change in them is as slow as the development of some geological formation. He will never be furious about anything ; but he will never forget. One needs centuries for the study of such a character."

Several times that night Orde awoke to see Lu bending over the fire, or feeding the sick child with condensed milk and water ; and wondered idly if she ever slept, and what was the secret of the indomitable spirit dwelling within that lean form. But for the time being he had ceased to feel any very deep interest in anything ; and, as a matter of fact, was dead tired, his vitality sapped to the utmost, though he would have vehemently denied the fact, for it was one of his pet vanities to believe himself incapable of fatigue.

It was broad daylight when he awoke ; the door of the hut was pushed open, and a shaft of sunshine streamed in from the white world outside ; while Lu moved about, straightening up the place, making tea and fresh dampers.

During one of her many absences to the spring or woodshed Orde slipped into his clothes ; and, taking up Winthorpe, who was awake and smiling, with the wan patience of a convalescent child, sat down beside the fire. In a few moments the little fellow was asleep ; clasping in his hands a small, white bone charm that hung on the man's watch chain, which he proudly declared to be the symbol of kingship in one particular island of the Pacific.

Slipping his hand gently into his pocket, Orde drew forth a calf-bound edition of Ossian, which was—in turn with other small volumes—his constant companion, and began to read : the wildness, the romance of the florid prose suiting alike his nature and this mountain district, which he both knew and loved.

He murmured the half-remembered words over to himself, rolling them like wine upon his palate. But for all that he could not fix his mind upon what he read. Once more the little family engrossed his thoughts. The touch of Winthorpe's cropped yellow head against his heart thrilled him, and he wished that he had such a son of his own—wondered cynically if he had. Then turned his amused attention to the girl, and listened while she marshalled Harold ; ordering him to wash at the spring, to comb his hair, to feed the horse ; railing at him with a benevolent despotism. And, breakfast ready, attended to Orde's needs, immeasurably grateful for his care of Win, and the new life which he had brought them.

But, through it all, her impenetrable reserve, the wariness of her glance—which had even survived the intimate days and nights of nursing—never failed her. She was like a wild bird, ready to be off at a word. And Orde, watching her over the top of the child's yellow head, in the whimsical, easy mood engendered of the bright morning, wondered how far she would fly at the challenge of a single question.

That she, on her side, did not lack curiosity was evident. Now her attention was somewhat diverted from the child, it showed in her every glance, in the words she let drop with apparent carelessness, though she kept scrupulously clear of any direct question.

" It won't not do for the kid ter get too set on yer, or he'll miss yer when ye've gone.—Best not have no meat fur breakfast ; ye'll be running yourself short, if you've got far to



travel ;" or :—" When you do go, Harold could go a mite of the way with you to help with the traps." All this with a detached air and averted face, though it was plain from the alert poise of her head and the nervous attention with which she awaited his reply, that the girl was devoured by anxiety.

Still Orde realized that there was more of heroism than of vulgar curiosity in the girl's behaviour. For it was evident that, whatever the straits in which he left them, she would make no further claim on his kindness, no appeal for his sympathy. That, as she could not bring herself to volunteer any information, neither could she ask for it. It would have been more childish, more feminine of her, to have clung to him, to have thrown herself on his mercy ; and a rather cruel determination to force her to some direct revelation or appeal gathered in his mind.

As far as women went this man of many experiences was a spoilt child ; he boasted that he understood them through and through—that no woman had ever seriously repulsed him. He was warm with benevolent impulses towards this little nest of forsaken birds. He saw himself as the God of their divinity, their sun, their moon, their giver of all good things. But he must be acknowledged, sought after ; and the reserve of this embryo creature piqued him. From the time that, at the age of ten, he had run away to sea, been bought back after one voyage, and sent to a public school, Orde had tried everything. Brilliantly successful during his first year at Oxford, he had suddenly tired of it, and enlisted in a marching regiment ; had been a lumber man in the Adirondacks, science master in a girls' school in New York, pearl fisher and merchant in the Pacific, author and strolling player.

His kindness was great, but it was depreciated by his short memory, for we cannot properly confer a favour without placing ourselves under some obligation. But Julian gourmandized his friendships, and digested them with a calm mind of utter oblivion ; while for his passions—which left behind them a trail of maimed lives and broken hearts—he was scarcely responsible, being incapable of realizing the importance of any yesterday. He gave with both hands, but also took with both hands. An artist in human emotions, he could yet brook no shadow of a repulse ; and in the manner

of this wild bush child there was a hint of something foreign to his many experiences.

Breakfast ready, he laid Winthorpe down upon the big bed; and deliberately began to collect his belongings, rolling up his blankets and strapping the mackintosh around them; getting his food-stuff into the square of canvas upon the floor, and knotting it at the corners. Whistling softly to himself, and noticing meanwhile, with a sense of triumph, the furtive way the girl watched him, the flash of white beneath her lids as she bent over the pan in which she was washing dishes.

Once she leant across the table with both hands flat upon it, palms downwards, and looked straight into his face. But even then she did not condescend to any open question; only remarking laconically:—"Goin' ? Ye've got a fine mornin' for a start." Then hesitated, as Orde tugged at the knot of his bundle and spoke again in a tone of deliberate unconcern, though her voice was hoarse with sheer nervousness.

"You must leave us some sort of an address, so that they'll be able to pay you back when—when they comes home."

"Oh, that's nothing."

"Mayhap yer'll be passin' this way again." She spoke with an air of perfunctory politeness, while her eyes were fixed on the pot she was scouring, leaning sideways over the table, her sharp elbows raised.

"It's scarcely likely."

Orde's cynical humour had left him. For the first time he seriously thought that he would indeed go, and leave them all as he had found them. Anyhow, what could he do? Sentiment would not help him in the rearing of another man's family. And going to the shed he fetched out the roan, slowly chewing over the last mouthful of its breakfast, and began loading it; talking to it meanwhile in the medley of languages in which he delighted; patting it and rubbing it behind the ears, for he loved animals—they at least never differed from or repulsed him; while he had a curious fascination for the smaller wild creatures of the woods.

Harold had been busy since breakfast over a heap of traps on the snow outside the door; and now, as he dragged them forward to the steps, Orde saw that he had tied them firmly together, leaving a loop to pass over his shoulders. It was evident that the boy had guessed at his departure, that his



slow brain was working for some definite end ; and he watched him with interest as he moved over to the big bed, pulled off one of the rugs, folded it in four, and began to roll it up, holding a length of twine ready in his mouth.

"What are you doin', Harold Tempest ? Put that there blanket back on the bed this moment !" It was Lu who spoke from the doorway, bent to one side by a tin of water she had fetched from the spring. "Do you hear me ? Put that blanket back !"

For a moment the boy hesitated, then deliberately took the string from his mouth, and began fastening it round the roll he had formed.

There was a crash, as Lu kicked over the bundle of traps at the door and moved forward, slopping the water in great pools across the mud floor.

"What are you thinkin' of, muckin' up the bed in that fashion ? Take yer traps an' be off, an' do something for yer livin' ! Didn't I tell yer to drop that there blanket ?" And, putting down the pail, she advanced upon Harold, who snatched his bundle from the floor and stood up, one arm raised before his face.

"Lemme alone ! It ain't none o' your business. I'm goin'."

"It's time yer was !"

"I mean as how I'm goin' along o' him. I ain't goin' trap-pin' alone no more. I'm goin' along o' him !" The boy leaned forward and bellowed the words loudly, as much for the sake of bolstering up his own courage as impressing his sister.

"Oh, you are, are yer ?" Lu turned towards the table, and began to collect the newly-washed dishes, with a fine air of indifference. "Who troubles where you go, and what yer do ?" she added. But the enamel plates clashed against each other ; and Orde saw that she was trembling from head to foot, as he moved over to Winthorpe and began to coax the little charm away from him.

"Now then, son, I'm afraid you must let me have that. Come now, it's time I was off. Look here ! I will give you this instead." And he offered a stick of chocolate, done up in silver paper, at which the child snatched, dropping the charm, which was immediately pocketed.

"Well, good-bye ;" and he put out his hand to Lu, who leant against the table, gripping it behind her with both

hands. But she did not appear to notice the action ; her eyes were fixed on her brother. " You ain't goin' along with him, ter leave me an' the kid ? " Suddenly it seemed as though she appealed to him as a man, and the boy flushed uneasily ; her change of front made him feel small and mean, he would rather a thousand times that she had flown at him.

" One o' us has got ter go—ter get help. Maybe we'll land along o' a town. An' I can find a job, an' come back with meal—an' stuff."

" You know he ain't goin' near no town. But there ! get along if yer so minded ;" and the girl turned to the fire, taking off the kettle, and raking together the ashes : then flung round with a sudden spurt of fury. " Go ! Go, if yer goin' ! What do you want ter stand loiterin' there for ? Do you think I want you ? No, by gummy ! What is there to you but another mouth to fill ?—like the rest o' yer kind, all mouth an' belly. Though I reckoned it were generally counted manners to wait till you was asked, and he don't seem no ways anxious for yer company." Lu's anger had dropped to a mood of bitter scorn, though even while she spoke her eyes searched Harold's face with passionate eagerness.

" It were their fault." The boy stooped and looped the string of the traps over his shoulders :—" They run us inter it all ; they didn't aughter gone an' done it."

" Go ! Do you hear me ? Go ! I'm about full up of you an' your lip." She pointed a shaking finger towards the door, and Orde felt that they were both in it—that she only wished them gone now that she might realize the worst. What an idea she must have of men and their ways ! No wonder, and he glanced at the boy with dislike. Ungrateful young animal ! Had he no heart, no warm blood in his veins ? Once again he put out his hand.

" After all, it's not my fault ! The track's free ; if he wants to come, he must. Anyhow, shake hands with me, you little wild cat."

Lu put out her hand and touched his coldly. " Good-bye, an' I'm sure we're much beholden ter you." Her eyes were averted from Harold ; but though they were fixed on the stranger, he felt that she did not see him. " Good-bye, an' I hope as how you'll have good luck. Be quiet ! Be quiet, I tell you ! " With sudden sharpness, as if she could stand no

more, Lu flung round upon Winthorpe, who—having finished the chocolate, and suddenly realized that he was to lose his new friend—now lifted his voice in a loud wail, feebly endeavouring to struggle to his feet.

"Oh, be quiet ! Do be quiet, now !" the girl entreated ; and, dropping to the ground, she clasped her arms round the child and pressed her forehead against his curls.

The elder boy was already down the steps, and stood with his hand on the roan's bridle, as if anxious to show how useful he could be, yet afraid of a repulse if he made himself too conspicuous. But the man hesitated.

It had been a real human comedy ; and yet somehow it had failed. The setting was perfect : the littered room—black with the smoke of many fires and dim with the almost imperceptible wood ash that filled the air—was cut by a shaft of light, which fell from the open door across the mattress on the floor, the child's downy golden head, the girl's thin figure and lank black hair.

Orde's eyes took in every detail. The old fowling-piece and hatchet hung over the open fireplace. The slab table, supported by bark-covered stumps sunk into the mud floor ; the logs of wood that served as stools ; the little pools of water which Lu had spilt, already gathering up a margin of dust ; the rough brown blankets ; the golden-brown sacking which covered the mattress ; the red-and-white counterpane on the big bed, the one touch of brightness or comparative luxury. The setting was complete in its Rembrandt-like light and shade. But somehow the comedy had failed. Orde was not used to failure, and a sudden feeling of respect for this stiff-necked little creature, that he had never before experienced for any one of her sex—not even excepting his own mother—rose up in his heart, and mingled with it a sense of resentment, which, in all the years to come, he never entirely lost.

"Well, I must be going. Adieu." But he still lingered ; then, half-shamefacedly, made his first concession. "Look here, I will leave you this sack of meal if it would be of any use. I have some flour."

"Thank yer kindly, but I couldn't not think of deprivin' yer."

"As you will. Then it's good-bye." And he moved down the step, settling the straps of his gun over his shoulders, then

glanced back. The girl was standing in the shaft of sunshine. She had lifted the child, and held it against her breast while her tragic eyes gazed straight at Orde over the top of his yellow head. Still she did not speak, and suddenly—with a rush of strange new feeling, more sincere than anything he had known for years—the man owned himself beaten, and turned upon Harold.

“ Let the horse be—I’m not going yet. Good God ! boy, have you no bowels of compassion ? Are you in such a hurry to leave the only home you ever knew ? ” he cried, for the lad’s face had clouded suddenly. Then, with a loud, somewhat forced laugh, he turned into the hut, slipped his gun from his shoulders, snatched Winthorpe from Lu’s arm, and cuddled him up to his heart, rubbing his bearded chin against the child’s head.

“ Stupid ! stupid ! Did you really think that I was going ? I was only playing. Silly, silly child ! ” He put out his hand and raised Lu’s chin. He was right : after all, she was only a child. What a fool he had been to have allowed himself to become annoyed by any such crude assumption of dignity—obstinacy. To imagine, as he had done, the check of that fierce sex antagonism, which he had heard of, but never, as yet, encountered.

“ My dear, my dear ! Did you imagine that I could be such a heartless brute as to go away and leave you, and this adorable babe, here alone to starve ? It was only a game—all a game. Ye gods, what a stunted youth ! Not even to know a joke when you see it.” His amazement and pity were real. Implicitly believing himself that it was all—from beginning to end—mere sportive playfulness, it seemed unutterably sad that the lives of any children could have been so drab as to leave them completely bereft of all sense of humour ; and, dropping his hand from Lu’s chin, he caught her fingers in his.

“ What a hard hand ! *Pauvre petite* !—you must have done more than a fair share of the world’s work. But we must alter all that now.” He drew her a little nearer and put his arm round her shoulders. “ Look here, little one, you must tell me how you stand. Let me be your friend, else I can do nothing.”

Lu did not repulse him, but her curiously brilliant, light-



coloured eyes were fixed on his face without wavering ; and Orde's instinct told him that he was being summed up, once and for all.

" It comes to this now," he continued : " I can't stay here with you because I've got most of my trapping gear and stuff for curing skins at my hut over the shoulder of the mountain, some six miles away, as I make it. Pon' my soul ! I scarcely know what to do." He hesitated, with his hand to his chin, roguishly eyeing the girl ; then, flushed with a delightful sense of splendid generosity, stretched out both hands. " Yes, I do ! I was only joking again. Suppose you come with me—live with me in my hut ? What do you think of that now ? There is plenty for all of us. A cart left me a load of provisions all ready last week, and then there is the stuff I have here. And you, Lu, shall housekeep for me, and Harold help with the traps and snares. And Win—what shall Win do ?" And he snapped his fingers at the child who was drowsing languidly upon the girl's shoulders. " Win shall be ' the inspiration of all our labours and our lives.' "

" We'd be a burden on you—the three of us."

" Perish the thought ! ' Never let it be said that fate itself could awe the soul of Richard.' Come—you must come ; there is nothing else to be done. After all, it is not for life." The corners of his mouth twisted, for he knew himself too well to set any limit of time to his affections, though now his cynicism was all aimed at himself.

" For this small fellow's sake," he went on, caressing the back of Win's limp little hand with one finger, " I'll do the best I can for you. God knows I only want to help you, child, and, after all, I am as much alone as you are." His voice was broken by sincere feeling ; his bright red-brown eyes clouded with tears. All his life he had desired some abiding affection, been cursed by his own faithlessness. It might be that in these children's hearts he could at last find contentment. For the knowledge of his own fickleness, of the unbearable sense of boredom, which dropped like a dark cloud over his dearest desires, haunted the man. Something of all this Lu might have realized ; for after another long searching glance, she caught at the hand which lay on hers, and, drawing it to her lips, kissed it. An act of fealty and surrender.

## CHAPTER V

ORDE's humpy lay to the north of the mountain ; and between the climb up hill and the scramble down, the circuitous route made necessary by landslip and ravine and impenetrable bush, it was a good eight miles of actual distance. But in some ways it was even more, for it led to a new world. True, the forest was still there ; but it was slashed with open spaces ; permeated by clean air and light ; while the snow lay thickly only in patches, or against the shady side of the trees ; above all, there was to be seen the blue of distance ; the rugged sides of yet other mountains ; and, from one point, a glimpse of open plain and ghostly ring-barked trees.

From the first sight of that triangular patch of pasture-land, showing within the deep fork of the mountains, Lu realized that it was what she had always, though unconsciously, longed for—Clear open country, wind-swept heights, and the rolling clouds which gather on a far horizon ; while, on the other hand, Orde clung to the forest and the close companionship of the trees which he loved.

The humpy was solidly built, of panels cut from the outside slices of tree-trunks, and slipped in horizontally, one above another, between upright posts ; the smooth-cut side inward, the rough, rounded portion forming a fluted outer wall ; while the roof was covered with sheets of bark, hung over by lengths of green hide, weighed down with logs. Across one end was a wide bunk, across the other an open fireplace, hung at either side with crockery and pots and pans ; while along the side walls, save where they were broken by the door and window, ran a shelf, so wide that it served as a table ; and above the bed another shelf to hold the books Orde carried in his swag, and others which were packed away in a great box. Piled upon the bunk, and carefully covered with oil-skin, were more wonders : feather pillows, and Italian blankets, faded to a soft glow of colour ; choice cups and saucers, a wonder to Lu, who had never drunk from anything save stained and cracked enamel. And, above all, a wondrous rug over which she was never tired of poring, showing a deep blue background, with a great fruit-tree in dull ochre and brown, and a snake twisted



among its boughs ; at either side of its spreading roots a camel and a lion ; and on the dull crimson border a continuous procession of leaping hares. There was also an old Spanish lamp, with pierced brass fans at either side ; and—most incongruous of all—two coloured prints of Reynold's portraits, fine town ladies of a bygone age of finery : Anne Bingham, wearing her broad-brimmed hat and sweet set smile out there in the back of beyond, and—more vital—the Countess Spencer, with her full passionate lips, in befrilled cap and fur-edged tippet. All as incongruous as the man himself, with his calf-bound Ossian, Decameron, Cervantes, or Shakespeare's sonnets ; his boast that he could set a trap quicker than any rabbit in Victoria ; whisk an omelette lighter than the best chef ; and cap any quotation offered. A man who warmed himself in love and approbation as in the sun—and went away and forgot.

A bed was made up for the two boys under the shelf on the right of the fireplace : to be as carefully folded away each morning beneath the big bunk—covered with a blue and amber rug—as though distinguished visitors were momentarily expected. The first night Lu had also slept there. But after that a hollow tree—once used as a store, cut with a calico-glazed window, and a door to shut over the aperture, and so wide that she could lie out at full length—was accorded to her as her very own ; though later Winthorpe was also banished from the hut, on account of his unconscionably early waking ; and lay between Lu and the inner wall, which was black with fire, smooth and sweet-smelling.

On wintry nights the old tree, which was broken to half its height, shook and quivered against Lu's shoulders, with a sibilant whisper of leaves ; while the wind, which came rioting freely up the ravine, swirled round in the hollow ; for, excepting on wet snowy nights, Lu kept the door propped back, and lay across the opening on her bed of dried leaves, rolled round in an opossum rug, with only a narrow strip of face and the black curve of brows and lashes visible.

Once the sun set the forest awoke to its day ; with the shrilling note and swift dipping motion of the flying foxes and vampires, which hung supine, head downwards, till it was dark ; the hoarse scolding of the opossums ; the poignantly human, sobbing moan of the native bear ; and the long complaining note of the mopoke.

Conforming to the habits of the wild folk, Orde awoke to his most vigorous life at nightfall, and slept late, leaving the whole duty of visiting the snares to the two elder children ; breakfast being at any time between nine and ten.

But Lu, who required very little sleep, and woke early in spite of late nights, would bribe Win, when he also stirred, to stay quiet while she washed herself at the creek—blue with cold, but strictly observant of all the rules of cleanliness, in which Orde had found her such a ready disciple.

She would then dress Winthorpe, feed him from a cache she had put ready the night before ; chop wood ; and, in company with Harold when he appeared, see to all the traps within easy reach ; knocking over the head—with her eyes turned aside in an agony of remorse—any captives which she found caught by the wire round the middle instead of the neck, as she always prayed that they might be ; watching the hut meanwhile as a cat watches a mouse-hole, till a hand appeared drawing the curtain back from the little window.

Then Lu's day really began, in a glowing rush of housewifery ; still hushed, for Orde liked to drowse over a book in bed, to begin his day undisturbed by any jarring bustle or clatter. The only interruption he would tolerate being Winthorpe's prattle, the pull of the little hand upon his arm, the feel of the yellow head against his breast. But even Win must not whine or cry, or at that hour show any great exuberance of spirits. And Lu, preoccupied with the mysteries of coffee-making as Julian had taught it to her, of frying Johnny cakes and grilling bacon ; fearful of forgetting those before unknown luxuries—a white napkin over the bark tray, hot condensed milk, and, above all, hot plates ; her black brows bent, her crimson lower lip pushed up over the other, had yet to keep an eye on Winthorpe ; to coax him away with sugar or treacle when a certain fretful look grew upon Orde's face ; to see that Harold washed his neck and ears as well as his hands, and brushed last night's mud from his clothes. And all this without raising her voice ; to " rail like a fish wife," as Orde expressed it, being an unpardonable offence.

Sometimes nothing went right. The feeling of wrongness was in the air from the moment Lu entered the door ; while Orde would not even look up from his book, save with an exaggerated start if she happened to so much as rattle a cup.

"Can't you keep that child quiet? He is a perfect nuisance!" he would declare as Winthorpe clamoured for notice, no whit dismayed by the general atmosphere of depression.

It was on these days that Harold always left a large triangular patch unwashed at the back of his ears, and the Johnny-cakes "sat down" on her, as Lu described it; while there was not even the guerdon of a smile in exchange for the carefully-prepared breakfast, placed in silence beside the man's bunk.

Lu never either remonstrated or retaliated. But once outside the hut, washing up dishes in the open, so that Orde should not be further irritated by the unavoidable noise, wrestling with congealed bacon-fat in a cutting wind, which cooled the water the moment it was poured out, she snapped and railed at everything and everybody, excepting Orde himself.

"You an' your mucky neck, and the ways of you; enough to turn anyone fair sick! An' all them snares you set along down the south gully—all of them off when I went this morning; and all of them empty. If you don't know how to choose your saplings to spring nippy you ought to by this time. Chilblains bad, and you ain't got no feeling in your hands? Well, then, you've struck lucky! Don't I just wish I had no feeling in mine, neither! Did you kerosine them? No; I thought as much. Go an' get the bottle this minute, an' bring it here double quick sharp. No feelings in your hands! Well——"

But the storm would subside as the swollen hands were held out to her; to be smeared with kerosine, and bandaged up with strips torn from Lu's own pinafores and petticoats, which grew daily more abbreviated.

"Poor kid! Well, they are in a state and no mistake. Now just you mind as you don't go to warm your hands at the fire, or you'll flare up, whiff! like a twist o' bull's wool, an' there won't be no more left of you barrin' a little heap o' ashes. Now, then, go along with you, out o' my way! I've got my work to see to—an' if you look under a plate on the shelf to the right o' the hearth, you'll find a Johnny-cake with 'lasse in its innards. On'y, if you go worrying 'him,' I'll give you what for! There's been enough of that already."

Lu's persistent and often elaborate use of the double negative was a perpetual delight to Orde in his good moods.

"None of those snares by the peppermint ain't not gone off!" she declared, almost the first day the real business of the bush was started on.

"That's well: I must hope they've caught something."

"I say they haven't not gone off!"

"You say they haven't, and then you say they 'have not': two negatives make an affirmative, Green Eyes."

"Nothing can't not make them traps full, bar setting 'em again."

"But if you say 'no' twice over it means 'yes'; do you understand?"

"No."

"We say 'no'—like that, not 'now.'"

Lu rounded her mouth, and with a prodigious effort jerked out "No."

"That's better! Well, now! if the traps have not gone off, it's enough to say they haven't, without using 'not,' too. It's sheer waste." Orde's voice and smile were both ingratiating.

Lu nodded; she understood economy in anything.

"They haven't n—gone off," she repeated; and then added "No," with a prolonged rounded note.

Later on Orde heard her among the trees, busy with the traps, chanting over for Win's benefit, as well as her own:—"Say 'no,' and not 'now'—say 'no,' and not 'now'"—in a tone so like that of a wooing dove that it set the birds stirring among the fir-boughs, with a vague notion that spring was upon them; while they seemed to take up the very words—"No," not 'now'—say 'no,' and not 'now'"—so completely that it was to this that their notes were, in Orde's mind, for ever attuned.

There were many days such as these—"good days," the girl called them: while never even having heard of a temperament, it still remained a mystery to her mind what caused the bad days, which did not, of necessity, follow a bad evening's snaring. But these other days were all sunshine; when there was rioting in the big bunk while Lu prepared the breakfast, and Win, with shrieks of delight, slid down the switchback Orde made for him with his knees. Days when



Lu was "the little housekeeper," "the missus," "the cleverest cook in Christendom." Hours when Orde played bears on the floor with Win: roaring terribly, and always anxious that Lu should applaud the realism of his roars; of lessons in the elaborate construction of traps and snares. And—best of all—hours of reading aloud, when Win, tired of his games, slept on the rug before the fire, or curled up upon Orde's knee.

Such a medley of literature! Years after Lu remembered one, Marcus Aurelius, who seemed to find it very easy to tell other people how to be good—partly, she believed, because, being a king, he had no one to disagree with him. And someone else called Amiel, who also suffered from too much "gab," though not so "bossy" as Marcus Aurelius. And Omar, who was afflicted with "the hump;" and many more, of whom she held but a small opinion.

But there were others—Don Quixote and Arthur and his Knights—who were not contented with talking; who really did things, however inexplicable their point of view might appear. And something else called "The Romance of the Rose," a small book in a limp green cover, which left Lu with a vision of beauty too complete for any criticism, affecting her as did the poetry; the singing melody of Swinburne; Shelley's all exquisite cascade of words; the dainty fancies of Lovelace and Herrick; the ordered beauty of Morris, with its tapestry of noble thoughts. All this swept her away with it. She did not want real people or real things, but the movement, the colour, and the rhythm. As Orde read, her eyes would dilate till they seemed all pupils, her cheeks flushed, her body swayed. It was as if, with her, the poetry of motion was a real thing inseparable from poetry itself; while in the brilliant creature so evoked, her dingy rags neutralized to soft pastel tints in the glow of the fire—all the light from the Spanish lamp being focussed upon Orde's book—she seemed one with the wonderful rug upon which she sat. A whole world removed from the pinched, scolding drab of "bad days."

There was one thing Lu never forgot, never could forget, which held her for life. And this, curiously enough, was Swinburne's poem, "The Match;" though at that time she did not even know the meaning of many words it contained,

or ever really comprehend its purely Greek spirit : taking all her joys, at first with a passionate solemnity, and later with questioning cynicism :

“ If love were what the rose is,  
And I were like the leaf,  
Our lives would grow together  
In sad or singing weather.”

She had never even seen a rose apart from the wild sweet-briar blooms, but the very word grew to her as syllables of enchantment ; while the rush of melody brought the tears to her eyes.

“ It makes me too happy to be glad,” she said ; and Orde—staring at her curiously from above his book, surprised at the depth and insight of her words—laughed as she finished her sentence in a characteristic fashion, dashing away the tears from her eyes : “ He makes me as miserable as a shag on a rock. And yet—an’ yet—— Well, I’d give him best, an’ no mistake.”

But this was all beside the real business of the day. There were opossums to be skinned—work in which Harold took a strange delight—to be cleaned, and stretched on trees ; rubbed with salt and arsenic ; while in a rough lean-to, against the end of the hut, the piles of skins grew steadily. And there were snares to be set in the gathering gloom of the late afternoon, with a bent sapling and loop of wire against the trees where the opossums loved to sharpen their claws ; and steel traps with cruel teeth for wallaby and foxes beneath the low-growing scrub ; while after supper, when Winthorpe slept, there were wonderful nights of mooning opossums, during which Lu and Harold took it in turns to stay at home, keep up the fire, and guard the hut.

Lu never forgot those nights on which it was her turn to accompany Orde. Sometimes they would climb the ridge of the mountain, and she would descend almost to her old home, with bitter-sweet thoughts as to what it would mean should she see a light shining through the windows ; or in the opposite direction towards the blue distance, with its beckoning white-limbed trees. It all depended on the position of the moon ; for in mooning opossums at night you must get the tree on which they lie between you and the moon ; must follow up the curve of the trunk with your eye, and along each bough

and twig for the crouching figure you are in search of, whose every movement is hushed at the first sound of an alien footstep.

For there is the pad of the native bear and wombat ; the rustle and scuttle of the bandicoot ; the movement of the tiny-pouched mouse through the undergrowth, just tickling the drum of the ear. The opossum knows all these, and remains undismayed ; but human footsteps are another matter, calling for silence and immobility as complete as death itself. Therefore in these forests, where the trees are never bare of leaves, it needs more than a quick eye to see him, an instinct, an imagination to picture where he will be found. Lu's green eyes were keen as a cat's ; while it seemed as if her intelligence leapt with them up the trunks and along the boughs where the quarry would lie. In this way she was of far more use than Harold, but then she could not carry such a heavy load ; indeed, Orde had his chivalrous moods, when he would not allow her to carry anything, so the balance was evenly adjusted.

One night they neither went down the mountain-side nor over the ridge ; but up—steadily up and up. The snow still lay beneath the shady sides of the trees, but the ground was for the most part clear. There was a smell of growth everywhere : the earth was pulpy and fragrant with moss ; and when the low-growing peppermint brushed Lu's face, the young leaves were soft and tender against her cheek, giving out an indescribably clean, fragrant perfume as she caught and rubbed them between her fingers.

Up and up they went, following the track of an old timber-shute. In places, where the bush was thickest stepping along the logs, leaping from side to side to avoid the overhanging growth. All day Orde had been in one of his many moods—not bad-tempered or fault-finding, but moody ; savagely engrossed in skinning and curing, as if taking a delight in the work which he usually abhorred.

He did not seem to be anxious for opossums ; indeed, climbing higher and higher with a southern trend, he put the moon out of sight behind the broad flank of the mountain. The backs of Lu's legs grew stiff, her heart beat thickly. The belt of cartridges which she carried became heavier each moment. Besides, in following the timber-track, she was

obliged to jump to the ground in between each log, thereby doubling the labour, while Orde took them in his stride.

But still he held on, without a word or glance behind him. Up and up, till the scrub grew denser and denser, and the number of tall trees diminished. Up and up till the gnarled myrtles and gums which remained were dwarfed and distorted. For there on the heights the wind took the trees and twisted them to its liking, giving them no peace for growth.

Miserably conscious of being left far behind, staring upwards with dimmed eyes, suddenly—to her amazement—Lu saw that the mountain had come to an end. She had lived so close to it, so low against the side, that she had never seen the top—only battalion upon battalion of trees, and that one glimpse of distance.

But here was a rugged broken line like the end of the world : clear cut—still white with snow—against an immensity of sky.

Right at the very top, poised against space, was Orde's figure. He threw up his arms and waved and shouted as Lu appeared, in response to which she plunged forward and stumbled on till she stood beside him. Saw, to her dismay, another mountain-slope, another sea of trees—an endless undulating mass of foliage : backed a few paces : dropped upon her heels, and sat staring upwards in an attitude of pure adoration.

"Why do you sit there ? Come up farther !" shouted Orde from the wind-swept height above her.

Lu shook her head. "No ; I can see the world at the other side from there. I want to think there ain't no more mountains or trees—that it's all open. Nothing but the sky—miles upon miles, upon miles of it. I've never not had enough before. An' look there." She pointed over the shoulder of the range, where the moon was to be seen swimming in a luminous, mist-haunted depth, that showed neither base nor boundary. "Look at it, coming up the sky from nowhere." She twisted round, sat back, clasped her knees with her arms, and rested her chin upon them. "That's what I like ; that the way as how you came—from nowhere. It makes me feel"—and she stretched out both arms with a dramatic gesture—"it makes me feel ropeable ; as if there was something in me that wanted to break loose and get clean away. It makes



me——," she went on dreamily, then broke off with a nervous laugh; and the quick sidelong glance which made her so completely one with the wild creatures of the forest. "There now, you'll think I've gone clean balmy." Her tone was apologetic. "But I've never not—never seen enough before; never not seen beyond."

"Look there." Orde descended a few steps, and, dropping to the ground by her side, pointed. "There's the Southern Cross. No, you're wrong; follow the line of my arm. There! by that dark space—the coal-sack, as they call it here."

"Yes." Lu gazed, with scant interest, at the dull imagery of an inverted kite, which has gained such curious fame. "It ain't much of a cross—at least, it don't seem so to me. I like the darkness along of it best; that looks as if there were a hole in the sky, you can't see no end to that." And for a while she ruminated, then waved a descriptive arm. "An' that, along there, down the hollow where the moon comes back-slanging up from nowhere. Would that be where God lives, now?"

"Lu;" Orde's voice was curious. Here was something primitive, elemental, almost untaught; it might be that he would light on some new idea or revival of pure paganism. "What do you think that the God you speak of is like? To look at, I mean."

"Oh, crossish, with a white beard, an' zigzaggy stuff in His hands; a-sitting on big chair, with twirly things all over it."

"You've seen a picture?" Orde's tone was one of suspicion and disappointment.

"Well, yes; the parson as baptized us, he'd got a book with a print in it. An' God looked fair mad. Not that it's to be wondered at," she added, as if apologizing for the moods of the Almighty; "it's likely as the world does seem a fair schicer at times."

"What's a schicer?"

"Oh, you know—a mine as ain't got nothing in it. I've heard dad talk o' schicers time upon time. He was a miner afore he took to the splitting, an' he said a schicer was like a woman—always wantin' something, with her mouth open, and nothing to her."

"But you—your own idea of God, Lu? What you yourself think?"

"Well, I can't think, and that's straight," admitted Lu frankly. "I sort of feel God—when the wind's in the top o' the trees, or there's something like that there." And again she pointed to the moon. "But then the picture of the old gentleman comes back to my mind, an' spoils it all. I wish God wasn't not like that. There was a fossicker come along the creek once with just such a beard, and I didn't not—didn't like him; a real 'old hand,' he was, I reckon. But perhaps it wasn't a true picture." Her eyes sought Orde's with a wistful entreaty.

"A true picture! No, ye gods—no! A cantankerous old man with a beard? Shades of Olympus, what a descent! It's a bogey, a jealous, ill-tempered bogey, child, that they've dressed up to frighten joy away with. What word have you for such a creature? A bunyip—yes, that's it—a bunyip with a beard."

"Then there ain't——"

"But there are: gods everywhere. Not a God, but gods—elusive, lurking; frightened into the secret places of the earth by the world's fear of their nakedness, their lovely shining limbs, their grace and strength and beauty. More lovely than any mortal; more lovable than any chaste divinity alone upon a height. Lu! have you ever heard of Endymion, and how the moon stooped from heaven to woo him? And Apollo, beautiful as the dawn?"

"But did they really live—did you ever see them up here among the Ranges?" And she glanced round with quick eyes, which held neither timidity nor awe, only an intense eagerness.

"Really live?" With a laugh Orde rose to his feet and stretched himself. "Ugh, it's getting cold here! Live? No, child; nothing ever did or ever will live beyond our own appetites and desires. They were children of the imagination. But what children, and what imaginations! And then a crossish old man with a beard! Heavens, what a drop! Tell me, Lu, what was He dressed in?"

"Well, He had a sort of a blue cloak thing, an' a square locket; an' a skirt o' red stuff as was too long, an' all reefed up anyhow. An' His toes was all coming out o' His boots; there wasn't not much more than the soles left."

"Sandals! sandals, by all that's holy!" laughed Orde.

"Oh, Lu, Lu! what a pure delight you are to me! Sandals! Their one concession to the classic ideal, and you call them boots with the toes out! That's what the parson's book has done for you—and for most people, too. Bound their imagination by bell and book to believe in nothing that's not fully clothed. The clean, bare skin, the curve of a woman's breast, the ripple of a man's muscle: Venus and all her ways—the lure of the Evil One! Well, since it's obvious that, being a woman, you must believe in something, I will instruct you in the classic faith, my young friend. That, at any rate, will open the door of your mind, let in air and sunshine, which is more than all the Commandments can do for you."

"The best thing, seeing as there ain't no God—" said Lu sagely, "is not to believe in anything that you can't not put out your hand and touch—nothing that ain't sticking out a mile, plain for you to see!"

"Wisely spoken, most wise Didymus. And now, as it's past midnight, it might be as well that we should return to a lower plain of earth."

"We ain't got no 'possum."

Lu rose, shivering a little, and brushed the snow from her frock. After all, one must live. But Orde only laughed as he threw back his shoulders, picked up his gun, and turned to descend.

"And yet we have not been without profit; we have explored the recesses of our secret beliefs—and we have talked. Ye gods, how we have talked! And talk, my dear Lu," he added, with a sudden burst of candour, "is the very breath of my nostrils."

Orde spoke truly. It was, indeed, an intoxication beyond all words, as he showed by the fashion in which he seized upon this wild bush child as an audience; and, once started on the theme, populated the forest, for weeks afterwards, with Greek shapes; making the old gods and goddesses, the innumerable nymphs and dryads, live as surely as did the children themselves. Even engrossing the past. So that, to Lu's mind, the sad and tender memory of her mother took upon itself the shape of Persephone, while the hated Joe became Pluto.

And yet, in spite of this love of talk, for months, even for years at a time, Orde had, again and again, chosen to divorce

himself from all his fellows, to live in places where there was no human voice to be heard, unless it was the echo of his own, apostrophizing the wild creatures or talking to his horse or dog.

## CHAPTER VI

SPRING came in with a breath of soft winds, a profusion of young leaves—ruby tipped ; great tresses of mimosa ; and wanton wreathes of sarsaparilla, the time of Winthorpe's third birthday.

Orde grew restless, could not keep his eyes on his book, gazing most often in the direction of the patch of open country ; while Lu watched him keenly, for her old hatred of the winter was gone, and now she dreaded the spring, with all its tender ways.

By this time the wild creatures were changing their coats ; the opossum's fur, patchy and thin, made them scarcely worth the snaring, while half the foxes seemed mangy ; so that most of the work now gathered round the hut. All the skins were gone over, sorted out, combed with fine steel combs, and trimmed : those of animals which had been snared separated from those which had been shot, and were therefore less valuable.

But this could not go on for ever ; besides, the stores were running short, and there was a feeling in the air as if everything was coming to an end.

Then the roan was groomed and his fetlocks trimmed ; all without a word, for Orde's talkativeness was mostly kept for abstract subjects. He disliked, even shrank from, discussing what he was actually about ; explaining himself in any way. Besides which, he took a curious delight in mystifying people. He liked to feel that it was said of him : " That fellow, Julian Orde ! Why, one never knows what he will be up to next. He thinks no more of going to the end of the world than we do of a Saturday to Monday." And so he was used to making all his preparations with a childish secrecy ; though on this occasion it annoyed him that Lu asked no questions, evinced no curiosity—a fact bringing him up against that same hard, dead wall in her character which had before proved so exasperating.

But still, for another week, nothing happened, though fall



that time the great packs of furs lay ready—sewn in sacking—while Julian sat on the doorstep whittling out the head of a walking-stick—smoothing, sand-papering, and polishing, as though nothing else in life mattered.

Then came a morning when he told Harold to groom and saddle the old horse ; and—bidding her leave the kettle on the fire—ordered Lu out of the hut directly breakfast was over, shut the door, and remained inside for an hour or more.

“ Looks like as how he was going away.” The roan, patient and indifferent as ever, was ready, and Harold leant against its shoulder, rubbing one bare foot up and down his shin, with a curious side-glance at Lu, who was washing dishes.

The girl’s lips tightened, while her clear skin bleached beneath its delicate powdering of freckles. For it is one matter to fear a thing, and another to hear it put into actual words. But she went on steadily with her work, not so much as glancing up or rattling a cup.

“ You don’t care, I suppose ; it ain’t nothing to you !” taunted the boy ; for of late he had grown restless under the double pressure of Lu’s supremacy, and Julian’s constant irritation with his slovenly ways, and was filled with a crude desire to probe, to hurt.

The girl realized this ; knew that he was becoming daily more undependable and disobedient ; more impatient of any interference. Though she did not realize that what was happening to Harold happens, in every new country, with the masculine youth of the second or third generation. For though, in all such places, the children are above the ordinary in strength and intelligence up to a certain age ; when they reach ten or eleven years there comes a barren period, in which they almost cease to develop, either mentally or physically ; the first step—unless they possess unusually strong characters, or are very carefully dealt with—on the downward path which floods the Australian cities with larrikins ; while, curiously enough, with the cessation of development comes the desire for emancipation from all control.

“ He’ll go away, an’ won’t come back no more !” persisted the boy spitefully. “ I’m not fretting ; I can peg out my own claim, I reckon. But what ’ull you do—eh, young Lu ? That’s what I’d like ter know. It’s different for chaps ; they’re able to shift for themselves. But a girl !” And the

urchin spat to show his contempt; for his father had taught him how much women were worth.

"You talk like the looney you are, Harold Tempest. It's a likely thing, ain't it, that he'll go away and leave that house full of books an' all that tack? You keep your breath to cool your porridge, my son. I don't want none of your chyaking round here."

"Well, I wonder as how you don't say something—there's the kid!"

"Say something! What's the good of talking to a man once he's set on a thing? Might as well try to stop a running stream by throwing a twig in it. Dam it up a mite, an' you have it worse nor ever it was afore. You get along with you; you make me tired you do." And she sluiced the water from her dish, with such savage energy that the roan glanced up in mild surprise, as it eddied round its hoofs. "You won't never do nothing, you won't, except blow: you're one of them folk as was born tired. Get out o' my way now; I'm going to carry these dishes indoors."

With a sudden determination to break the silence that lay within the hut, Lu had piled cups and plates upon her tray, and was turning towards the door, when it opened, and Orde appeared upon the threshold.

Harold stared, open mouthed, as well he might, the sight which met his eyes being inexplicable to a bush child, accustomed all his life to bearded men. For Orde had shaved. His cheeks and nose, with the lower part of his forehead, had been tanned to a deep ruddy glow; but now the skin of his upper lip and jaw was smooth and oddly white, matching the triangular strip between his crest of hair and forehead, cut across at a right angle by the line of the slouch hat, which he always wore on one side—a habit still clinging to him from the days of a forage cap. The wide sweep of his muscular throat, above the turned-down collar of his flannel shirt, was also smooth and white; his rather small, reddish eyes—with the long lashes which gave them the effect of size—were sparkling; his mouth, a little open on the edge of a laugh, showing a line of white teeth, very square and even; while he was wearing the Norfolk jacket in which Lu had first seen him, and buck-skin breeches of a warm golden brown.

In all his moods Orde seemed to run through a scale of

colour. During moments of irritation there was an effect of more red both in hair and eyes—in the latter, little points of red light which Lu had learnt to watch for and dread ; while during his many fits of depression his skin grew colourless, and appeared to sag ; his hair became dry and lifeless, the white grey hairs seeming to actually increase, till the whole effect was one of dusty greyness. But now he was at his best, all mellow and glowing.

“ Well ? ” he said, and there was as much frank vanity in his voice as might be shown by any belle fronting her adorers for the first time in a new ball-gown. “ Well ? ” And involuntarily he passed his hand round his smooth chin and over his mouth, in an oddly childish, half-bashful gesture ; at once deprecating and appealing for admiration.

Years afterwards Lu remembered him as he stood there against the dark background of the open doorway. Indeed, it was thus she always visualized him, with photographic clearness.

It was a brilliant morning. There had been a little rain during the night, and everything was sparkling in the sunshine ; while the air was full of sound ; the chortling note of magpies ; the cries of the green parrots flashing among the trees, the clear thin pipe of the white-eye. It was a morning for youth. Orde, with all his exuberant vitality, fitted it—in spite of his forty odd years—far better than the sullen-faced boy, leaning against the roan’s side ; or the young girl bowed over her tray-load of crockery, all the colour wiped out of her by the thought that her worst apprehensions were to be fulfilled. In the days to come memory conceded an overflowing mode of admiration to Orde’s appearance. But Lu’s mind was of that direct order which realizes the big things of life first, and for the moment nothing mattered beyond the overwhelming fact that he was going : that once more her life had broken off short ; while her whole experience forbade hope. For in spite of her assertion that Orde was not likely to go off and leave the hut—all his trapping-gear and many other belongings—she knew very well that men did do such things. That, as a matter of fact—judging by the many past experiences with which he had regaled her—Julian Orde was just the sort of man most likely to forget all else in the sudden onrush of some new whim.

"If ye stand aside a bit I can get in:" she said; and, passing him, slammed the tray down upon the big shelf and began arranging the crockery.

Suddenly Orde, who was standing with one brown Wellington—polished to a marvel of brightness—upon his foot, repulsed by the scant appreciation accorded him, remembered a grievance.

"I can't find one of my boots;" he said. "I cleaned them both yesterday, and put them at the end of the bunk, and now one's gone."

"Happen it's got kicked away under." And Lu dived, glad of any movement which might prevent the swelling ache of her throat from developing into sobs.

But the boot was not there. Nor yet under Harold's couch; nor in the lean-to; or the roan's shed; nor in her own sleeping-place—in all of which she hunted, with a deliberate thoroughness which seemed quite apart from herself, her agony of apprehension.

Had she possessed wit enough to have applauded Orde on his first appearance all would have been well. He intended to return in a couple of days at most, and the adieux would have been made in a manner befitting such a morning, and such a man as he wished to be. But when Lu felt strongly she was cursed with an inarticulation, unknown to shallower natures; which in a vague way affected Orde as it did Harold, bringing out all the latent cruelty of his nature.

"I never knew such a place! It's the same in everything, ever since you children have been here. A continual muddle—no peace, no method! Just look at this room now," he continued, rather unnecessarily, for the disorder of a frantic search was only too visible on every side. "I don't know how I endure it—no other man would ever put up with it. And then no gratitude, no feeling! Now, what is the good of looking under that bunk again? In the name of common sense I appeal to you!"

"Man! Lu! look what Win's gone and got!" chirruped a small voice from the open doorway, and Lu on the flat of her stomach at the side of the bunk turned at the same moment as Orde.

"God! Look at that child! Look at him now!"

"Pretty, pretty!" cooed the boy, glancing up from under



his mass of curls with a look of triumph, already tinged with dawning apprehension, in his blue eyes. "Pretty, pretty!" he repeated, and flashed his most disarming smile at Orde over the top of the treasure which he held clasped in both arms—the missing boot, its shining sides streaked, its top bulging with damp black soil, in which a gum sapling was planted rakishly askew.

It was the last straw. Orde did not speak. At first, because he felt that his grievance had reached a point beyond all words; and later because his mind was completely engrossed with his own affairs. Thus it was that he changed his boots, and loaded the roan in complete silence, breaking it only to shout some last direction to Harold; persistently ignoring Lu as the prime cause of all the trouble, though he could scarcely have said why.

However, by the time he really got off—with his favourite pipe in his mouth and the roan at his heels—the morning smiled once more; while in the dazzling sunshine and sweet-scented air the humour of the whole thing became so irresistible that he laughed aloud.

What a fantasy it was! That imp Winthorpe! Some day he would make a poem of it, or even a play—that would be better—there was money in plays, and none in poetry. The history of the three elves in the wood, a little like "The Goblin Market"; the rich growth, and strange beasts; Harold with his odd frog-like face; and Lu of the black hair and emerald eyes.

The thought pleased him so that it was not till he was a good couple of miles away, and began picking out the well-remembered trees, with a greeting to each, that he actually remembered he had spoken no word regarding his return.

"All the better," he thought. "It will be a surprise to them, pleasant or the reverse;" and he shrugged his shoulders. "One never really knows people in this world—extraordinarily cold-hearted!"

Orde's absence lasted for a little over a week. The stores at the humpy had been running low, but there was a sufficiency of all real necessities. The children were safe enough; and he met other trappers to whom it was pleasant to explain his methods.

Besides, after all, the township was really so near—a mere thirty miles—though Orde took a fantastic delight in both

thinking and speaking of it as lying at some great distance from his hunting-ground, thereby adding to his own sense of isolation and adventure. Tempest had adopted the same ruse, though for a different reason. Once having won his gay; city bride—who had been smitten with a sentimental desire for bush life—he did not intend that she should escape him. Therefore, with a true bushman's cunning, he had brought her home by a circuitous route, which made the distance appear incalculably far. A trackless way through virgin forests : or so she believed till Joe bridged it with a gay laugh at her credulity.

From the very first day Lu husbanded her resources to the utmost ; putting the members of her little kingdom upon a strict system of rations, in which her own share had, by the third day, diminished almost to vanishing-point. She never once thought : " There is enough to last two or three days, and then he will come back." She did not dare to count on that, or to reflect what must happen when the end arrived, harbouring every crumb to the uttermost.

" Who cares ?" said Harold ; though his loudly-expressed boast of self-sufficiency had come to naught. " We swotted for him all the time, an' he didn't not pay us nothing. What was there in that, I'd like to know ?"

But for all this talk his glance hung persistently between Lu and the path Orde had taken ; which they both in turn followed as far as they dared.

In after-years Lu laughed at the thought of how gullible they had all been, with the little township tucked away, so closely beneath them that she almost grew to believe that she could have dropped a stone on to its tin roofs from a point not three miles from the humpy.

Then one evening, when hope seemed farthest away, and watching and listening a sheer physical agony, came the echo of a deep " Coo-ee !" from among the trees. The sucking sound of hoofs upon the thick mud, a sonorous exhortation to the roan to keep its feet, for home was near ; and Orde appeared in the little clearing, his horse at his heels laden high with packs.

" Well, chickibiddies—ah, how goes it with you ? Lu, Harold, Win, there's my boy—the king of cream and curds !"

And lifting the child who had run to meet him, with a scream of delight, he buried his face in the fat neck.

"Lu doesn't care : Lu has no time to be bothered with us menfolk:" he continued, but without malice.

His conscience was reproaching him a little ; he was very glad to be home. The trappers had got nobly drunk at his expense, but after that all their interest in his methods had evaporated, and he was hungry for appreciation and affection.

"Lu doesn't care !" he repeated ; but by that time he was near enough to see the face of the girl who had stood stock still at his approach—her hands clenched at her side, the green eyes swimming in tears, the mobile lips trembling—and putting his arm round her shoulder drew her to him ; then raised her face and kissed her, feeling the rigid little form quiver from head to foot as she pressed closer to his side.

There was no doubt he was welcome, poignantly welcome.

"The world has nothing to bestow ;  
From our own selves the joy must flow  
And that dear hut our home,"

he quoted, a warmth of real feeling in his voice, his eyes misty with tears.

One of the many women he had loved—unfortunate enough to mistake the gourd-like growth of his passion for a family fig-tree—once remarked that, if Julian Orde could ever feel sufficiently deeply on any subject to be at a loss for an applicable quotation, or even to misquote, there might be some hope for him.

"Those sort of women," he had said, when it was repeated to him, "think that they can bribe eternity with a wedding-ring, a libation of champagne, an offering of sugared cake."

But for all that he had felt hurt, and rejoiced to find that he returned to the children freshly aglow with affection and magnanimous intentions ; for, in spite of the quotation, he was more deeply touched than he had been by all those amorous adventures in which he scorned himself as half beast, half fool.

## CHAPTER VII

DURING his stay in the township Orde had amused himself with buying clothes for the children, in addition to other household requisites ; choosing them with an eye to colouring rather than anything else ; electing to dress the boys all in

brown. Moleskins for Harold, a world too big ; and an entire knitted suit—breeches, jersey, and tasselled fisherman's cap—for Winthorpe ; so palpably unsuited to the oncoming summer that he was most often to be seen in a pair of bloomers, contrived from the sleeves of an old blue calico frock, with large white spots, drawn up, almost to his plump shoulders, by a pair of raw hide braces of Lu's contriving ; the whole topped by the stocking-cap, pulled down well over his ears, giving him the appearance of a diminutive gnome.

But Lu's wardrobe had been more difficult. Orde had set his heart on green, the green of her eyes, and there were no children's dresses to be obtained in that colour ; while the befrilled, pink-sprigged prints offered for his consideration were anathema.

Then one day, in a general store, he caught sight of a number of overalls, such as the bush women wear at their housework, made of green linen, cut round at the neck and hanging straight from a square yoke.

"They are too long, but she can cut them off at the hem," he thought, and went in and bought six ; which Lu chopped down, using the spare piece from each to fashion a rough sleeve, reaching to the elbow ; though her economy was such that she let them hang well below her ankles, declaring that they would shrink while she grew ; and disposed of the surplus length by wearing a leather belt of Orde's round her waist, and bagging the smock out over it. Moreover, she refused to alter more than three—that was enough for anyone—and so folded the others away, and washed and rewashed the ones in use, till they faded to the exact tint of the gum-trees, already losing their first spring freshness.

Lu, with her grey-green smocks and long bare legs, her black hair braided into two plaits, was a different creature from the faded little old woman that Orde had first chanced upon—the very impersonation of drabness. And quite suddenly he began to realize her under a fresh aspect ; to feel that boredom was still far away, for here was something new—an artistic possibility. "A Greek vase where I had merely envisaged a cooking-pot," as he put it to himself. "She will be a beauty, and of a very uncommon kind, one day:" he added, and began to find a curious fascination in watching the girl, directing and training her as though she had been a



rare plant: jealously preserving, meanwhile, every wild and primitive instinct: delighting in her sudden flare of jealousy when he petted Win overmuch, or Win ran to him first: playing upon her feelings, her candour, the pure femininity she shared with the other wild creatures of her sex, as upon an instrument; blandly ignoring everything that was conventionally moral, all the regular precepts for the upbringing of youth—"the Methodist cult," as he called it.

During the spring the little family had steadily increased. There was a ring-tailed ewe opossum, with her young one, in a box nailed against Lu's sleeping-place; a native bear; and innumerable semi-domesticated birds, among which was a native-companion that Orde had brought back with him one day after an expedition to the lowlands—an unfledged creature with bald head, wearied eyes, uncertain legs, and an appearance of infinite age.

However, as the bird grew its plumage thickened to a depth of satiny greyness, its legs gathered strength; and soon, to Orde's infinite delight, it began to practise those strange dancing steps, which are its great peculiarity, with a deliberate solemnity that earned for it the name of "the Professor."

Curiously enough it was, for the most part, at the sunset, not at dawn, as among its wild brethren, that the half-tamed creature practised its manœuvres, mincing and swaying among the grey shadows.

Sitting on the doorstep smoking one evening, a sudden thought struck Orde. "He wants a partner, Lu."

The girl shifted from one foot to another. "Go along, you're getting at me!" she protested.

But for all that he noticed that her eyes clung to the bird, that she moved her feet involuntarily in time to its motion. And the next evening—for something in her very pose, her long slender limbs, the lightness with which she moved, suggested the possibilities of dancing—he tried her again, and this time with success.

For after hesitating a moment, one shoulder awkwardly raised, she suddenly came to a decision, or was swept away by the spirit, the humour of the thing; and, tightening her belt and dragging her dress up higher, she sprang forward into the open space, and stood facing the bird: swayed to and fro for a moment; then, with a sudden peal of laughter

—very different from the dry chuckle that had been her usual expression of mirth or scorn—began to move in deliberate mimicry of its movements. Spreading her arms wide as it spread its wings, raising her knee almost to her chest, the lower leg outstretched, the toe pointed, while she balanced on the other foot, turning her head slowly from side to side at the full length of her neck, a curious deliberate awkwardness in each movement which was oddly attractive ; allied as it was to the complete balance, the clear-cut decision of each mincing step.

To Orde's mind the stage itself appeared incomparable. The straight, white trunks, the patch of green turf, the grey shadows which mingled so curiously with the dancing figures ; and it was in a spirit of enthrallment that he watched their movements. The hovering, then the patter of quick steps ; the change of position ; the sudden drop into complete immobility, save for a gentle swaying from side to side, a quivering of the girlish arms and grey wings, as they hung ready for the next spring.

And this was not the end of it. For with that first laugh it seemed as if Lu had discovered the ridiculous, the humour of life, the joy of complete abandonment. It marked a new epoch in her life, a well-spring of youth which quickened each evening as the grey bird's step quickened to hers, till all deliberation was lost in a whirl of green gown, grey plumage, and long legs.

There had never been such a pastoral, such a green room ! Orde, sitting smoking on the log before the door, owned as much, with his mind full of—oh, such dancers ! Dancers still dancing, or out-danced by death : dancers of a lifetime or a day. Now and then he prompted, but not often. For once his artistic sense had over-ridden his desire to dictate, and he realized how easily a thing, so perfect in its own way, might be spoilt by any more sophisticated suggestion.

Meanwhile his open delight in her achievement, the extravagant plans he made for her future, egged the girl on to fresh endeavour, and she practised in secret, step after step ; elaborating every movement and pose which he had applauded : just as once before she had practised saying " No " instead of " Now." Then one evening she sprang a surprise upon him, with a childish pride and delight that was quite new to her.

"He goes like this, and this," she remarked, swaying ; "but the parrots, if they danced, it would be like this !" And with a sudden shrill cry she launched forth in another movement, her heels together, her toes turned out ; fluttering her arms with the quick beat of wings ; darting forward with so exact an imitation of the rosella's flight that it was hard to believe she had not actually left the ground.

After that there were other birds and animals, their notes and actions—though the grey crane still remained first favourite—till her bush repertoire was complete.

And then there was nothing.

It was nobody's fault, as Orde was only too ready to confess ; but the fact remained—there was nothing. For he had now grown so accustomed to Lu's dancing that it had lost its charm : believed that it had only consisted in its novelty : wondered that he had ever thought the girl would be worth training for the stage. And once again, bored beyond endurance, he went to town, with the excuse that he needed more stores and new wires for the snares.

When he returned his interests were a little revived, or rather diverted to a fresh channel. He had bought some simple tools and materials from a travelling taxidermist, and was all eagerness to start again on an old hobby, which had enchanted him one lonely summer in the Adirondacks—stuffing and mounting birds and the smaller mammals.

Then followed a time of comparative peace ; though it held none of the sunshine of the early summer months ; intermingled with many dark days, when Lu was driven back upon her household tasks as the only work fit for one of her sex. When every word and movement, every demand made upon him by Win, whom he had spoilt beyond redemption, threw Orde into a state of violent irritation ; while he cursed Harold for forgetting to feed the birds and animals, for letting blood and grease dry upon his specimens, for any one of those qualities which he had once called the "gorgeous inconsistencies of youth." Days when he fiercely resented any interruption, and then railed because the fire had been allowed to die out beneath his glue-pot ; or the room—spread with his treasures, so littered with feathers that a breath of air would have sent them flying—of necessity remained unswept.

But still it was not always so. There were times when he

shared with the children every detail of his self-taught art ; when he even allowed Win to set up an ancient kooka-burra, crazily askew. When Lu learnt to handle the quaint little instruments, the presses, plyers, knives and needles, with the same swift sureness of touch which she brought to all she did—her washing of dishes and sweeping, her marshalling of the other two. For even her very exhortations and scoldings—racy of the soil as they were—showed no blurred outline or unfinished end ; while, as she dropped the ugly drawl, her enunciation became, in spite of archaic grammar, as clear as a bell.

And yet, excepting for a laughing threat to stuff her and set her up opposite the " Professor," no reference was now made to her dancing days ; so that, being an embryo woman, and stimulated to endeavour by admiration, love, and praise alone, the subject ceased to interest her.

Again Julian Orde went to town, in the middle of the trapping season, with all the skins which were ready ; re-appearing at the hut wearied and depressed, though not ill-tempered.

Then, once more, when the winter was almost past, he remained away close on a fortnight ; returning with his pack empty ; stabling the roan in silence ; taking off his wet coat and hanging it before the fire—for spring had come in with a bluster of rain and sleet—all without a word. Then sinking into the deep hammock chair and brooding, his chin on his hand.

Even through supper his mood held ; and to Lu's sensitive mind there was something final in his attitude. It was conceivable that he might never speak again, except in monosyllables ; never look at her, except with that hard stare which made her feel as though she were naked.

Harold alone, sullen and aggressive, provoked remark by upsetting the kettle, hissing furiously, among the grey ashes.

" T'weren't my fault," he began ; " the bloody thing——"

" Silence !" Orde flung to his feet, and began walking up and down the room, his hands deep in his pockets. " It wasn't his fault !" His tone was one of bitterest irony. " It was the bloody thing ! Heaven above ! is there anything that is anyone's fault—anything that is not ' bloody ' in this awful country ? And that's all I get ! A year and a



half of teaching, of constant care—and as crude, as foul-mouthed as ever! Well, it's over now! How I've endured it as long as I have, it's beyond me to say. Eighteen months of life, this precious life which will never come again, and nothing to show for it. And yet there is such a word as gratitude! What a world, ye Fates—what a world for any man with heart and soul and intelligence! What a life!"

And once more he sank into his chair, and sat there gazing at the fire; while Lu wondered if this man, sullen and scornful, could be the same who had laughed and applauded, with endless tales of past ballet dancers, while she and the grey bird danced away the summer's evening together.

No; it all came back to this—nothing ever was the same, ever would be the same for two seasons running. The lank grey crane, with rumpled feathers, was perched miserably upon one leg in a corner of the lean-to when she went to bid the roan good-night, pressing her wet cheek against his rough, mud-caked neck, and did not look as if he would ever dance again—ever had danced.

The damp had rotted a hollow place in the top of her tree-room, and the rain dripped through. She had meant to tell Orde on his return. But it did not matter, as long as she could lie so as to keep Win dry. Nothing mattered, since it was all over. She had feared some such end as the sequence of every journey to town. But now she feared no more, she knew.

And she was right. This time the end had come, and next morning with some blustering Orde unfolded his plans. She and Harold were to go to a dairy farm on the plains. The boy was old enough to earn his own living, with some supplementary teaching at the half-time school; while Lu was to learn all the tame tricks he had taught her to despise.

"Or else there will never be the chance of finding a husband who will have the courage to take you in hand, Miss Green Eyes," he concluded laughingly. Infinitely relieved that the announcement, which had been weighing on him for weeks, was at last made: that all the misery of a definite arrangement, a definite statement, had been dealt with.

And, after all, how fond he was of them! No longer on the defensive, he could allow himself some sentiment and

feeling. He had done his best ; no man on earth could have done more.

" Grief fills the room up of my absent child,  
Lies in his bed, walks up and down with me."

Orde sighed. Winthorpe, basking in his more mellow mood, had climbed on his knee, and he now laid his cheek against the child's curls. If he could only keep them all—and his own desires, he thought ; then, glancing up, met Lu's brooding eyes full upon him.

" And Win ?" she said.

" You don't ask about me, you don't realize how far I'm going. Lu, what is it about this country ? Is it so old that all sentiment is dead, or so young that it is not yet born ?"

" But I want to know about Win," persisted Lu.

The thought of losing Orde was beyond all words. It was immense, awful. But then he had never been quite real ; he was too wonderful for that. To her mind, he had come like one of the old gods of whom he was so fond of talking ; and like them he would go. He seemed one of those marvellous beings, past all human understanding, who are never quite familiar, quite real, of whom one does not even expect permanency. Nothing she said or did could hold such as him. But Win ! Win was near and dear. For all his naughty, defiant ways, Win turned to her, loved her, depended on her at every turn. The thought of Win away from her, sick or sorry, and wanting her, was unendurable.

" I want to know about Win. Is Win coming too ?" she repeated.

And in a fury of misunderstanding, hurt vanity, and a sort of shame—for which he himself could not account—Orde turned upon her, and gave her the truth ; with none of the explanations by which he had intended to soften the blow. Win was not going with them ; there was no cockey's wife who could be found ready to burden herself with so young a child. He himself was going to take him to Melbourne and place him in an orphanage. It had all been settled at the expense of a great deal of time and trouble—indeed, it was this that had caused the delay.

Putting the boy down, Orde turned towards the shelves,

and began to collect his books, heaping them one upon another in high piles ready for packing.

"I should have been off a month ago if it had not been for all this. A month, a whole month! Think of it—a month that nothing in life will ever give me back again. To think what it will be to eat a dinner again, instead of merely feeding. To mix with one's equals."

"He can't not go! He shan't not go! You have no right to take him!"

Lu's lips were white, her eyes sullen. At the moment Orde almost hated her. That awful double negative again. What a fool he had been to think that he could ever do anything with them: they were only ordinary, common children, after all!

"I won't let him go!"

"We shall see." The old hard look had come into Julian Orde's face as he moved towards the bunk; and, pulling out the big box, began arranging the books with his usual orderly precision.

## PART II





## CHAPTER VIII

THE memory of the first few weeks at the farm always seemed to Lu like a confused nightmare, through which Mackensie, sharp-eyed, loud-voiced, and indomitably active, and his wife, an immense bulk of slovenly incapacity, moved as the chief human figures of a sordid drama ; that in those days was dominated, sleeping and waking, by her terror of the cows ; round which the greater part of the work and all the talk of the place revolved.

Yet, at the very beginning, it was not quite so unendurable ; for Harold clung to her, even more bewildered by it all than she herself ; and with Lu the mere fact of anyone depending on her was enough to make life endurable.

The second night, when she was lying in her little partitioned-off room at the end of the veranda—of which the corrugated roof sloped so that she could only stand upright on the inner side—he had crept across from the hut where he slept with the two men ; and, hearing a tap at her window, Lu had gone out to find him with his arm up against one of the posts, his head leant upon it, and his shoulders shaking with sobs. Big Jake, the rouseabout, had thrashed him with a packstrap because he had not brought up all the horses. They had not told him how many there were, and how was he to know ? Anyhow, he was frightened of sleeping with Jake and Barney—the weasel-faced little townsman ; besides which, the hut was alive with vermin.

Lu drew him down beside her on the edge of the veranda, where he had his cry out, and finally slept till after midnight ; while she sat bolt upright, stroking the cropped sandy head, and staring out straight in front of her, with an expression of furious defiance and scorn, at the unlovely aspect.

Far away in the distance a faint line of mountains broke

the horizon. For the rest, there was the open plain, already cracked and dry, though the spring was scarcely over ; and ring-barked trees, with angular distorted limbs, like grotesque skeletons, showing white against the sky.

To the right in the immediate foreground stood the men's hut ; to the left the towering bulk of the silo, the saplings, yards, and pens ; while right in front of the veranda lay a manure-heap, with a pile of bullocks' skulls and hoofs, a broken plough and litter of empty tins.

It was all inexpressibly hideous. Even the moonlight—showing up each object as clearly as though it were day, and casting a dense black shadow—added no softness or beauty to the scene.

Indeed, the moon itself appeared as clear-edged and hard as though it were cut out and pasted upon the cloudless expanse of sky.

Orde had told Lu of farms in Arcady, where the sleek kine stood knee-deep in meadow-grass and blossom ; of Persephone among fields of flowers ; of Europa and the bull ; read Virgil's " *Bucolics* " aloud to her.

It was not his fault if that was all he knew or remembered of farms. Harold, whose misery took the form of protestations and blame, had now been insistent that Orde " didn't oughter gone an' done it."

But to Lu's mind it was nobody's fault. She seldom blamed an individual for the larger ills of life. The trouble lay with that something gigantic and unappeasable which wise people called Fate, and which she knew as Luck: her " Luck," which seemed to have a knack of getting out. That " something " which it was no good fighting against, the onslaught of which one must simply clench one's teeth and endure.

It was " bad luck " that had taken Win from her. Orde had done his best, had kept them for a year : nobody could be expected to provide indefinitely for anyone else, let alone another man's children. With grim, matter-of-fact wisdom Lu surveyed the whole affair as though it concerned someone else. Through two winters and one long summer Orde had played the part of Providence. Now it was over, though the wrench was none the less bitter for the fact that it appeared inevitable.

Still, as long as Harold brought his grievances to her, life was endurable. But this soon came to an end, for the boy was of a coarser fibre than his sister.

In a couple of weeks his long silences were only broken by expletives, as coarse as the men's—exaggeratedly so, because he found it gained him their favour. He learned to milk as if by instinct; and was put on to plough with a big two-furrowed plough that the next man had to lift for him when they turned; which was not often, for Mackensie had just taken up another three hundred and twenty acres, and was putting a large portion of it under cultivation; so that the three long ribbons of brown soil cut straight away for the best part of half a mile through the green, narrowing off to a hair's breadth in the distance, widening till they joined; then spreading out again, first on one side, then on the other. For Jake, Barney, and Harold were at it day after day, while the other man and Mackensie sunk poles for fencing.

There was a talk of the boy going to school when all the ploughing was done, or anyhow when the winter came. But it was only talk, for Harold did not care. He got on well enough with the men, and did not fancy the companionship of boys of his own age, who might look down on him for not knowing the things they knew.

Then he killed his first sheep, and, according to farm standards, became a man. But it was a horrible experience, for, though he had seen how the men did it—straining back the poor creature's throat so as to tighten the skin before cutting it, and then breaking its neck—he lacked both the knack and strength; and by the time the struggle was over was smothered in blood and terribly sick.

But for all that he had done it, and would side with Lu no longer. Indeed, took no notice of her beyond guying her, as did the other men, sitting with them outside their humpy at night, and laughing loudly at all their jokes till it was time to get the horses up.

At last, however, something happened which stirred Lu out of her apathy of pain: roused her to get even with the boy, and, incidentally, showed her the only way that any dominance or respect was to be won in this new world where she found herself. Not by skill, or even by cunning, certainly not by patience or forbearance, but by sheer brute force.



It happened that Harold had been sent down to one of the further paddocks to bring up a newly-born calf ; and the staggering creature, so piteously strange to the world and its ways, had fallen again and again as he pushed it up the incline to the sheds, with the mother lowing at his heels ; while again and again the lad lifted it and shoved it forward ; till at last, to save himself even the trouble of stooping, he endeavoured to kick it to its feet.

At that moment Lu, who was bringing up the horse for the milk cart—at the same time intent upon whittling and peeling a young gum sapling by way of a whip—happened to pass near on her way to the slip-rail, lifted her head, and saw what was being done.

“ Pick it up and carry it ! ” she shouted, the old note of command in her voice. “ You oughter be ashamed o’ yourself to treat a helpless thing like that, Harold Tempest ! Pick it up an’ carry it—do you hear ? ” And she pushed the boy forward.

With an ugly look upon his face he swung round upon her. “ Go to hell ! Do you think I’m goin’ to be ordered about by any blanky girl ? ”

“ Pick it up—do you hear me ? Pick it up ! ”

There was a dangerous concentration in Lu’s voice. But by way of answer the boy only laughed loudly, then crowed in derisive imitation of a cock.

“ Will you do as I tell you ? ” By this time the girl was white with anger. They were not more than a hundred yards from the shed ; she could have carried the calf easily enough herself, but she meant that Harold should do it. She had seen him ill-treating the animals before, and hated him for it. “ Will you do as I tell you ? ” she reiterated.

“ I’ll see you damned first ! You go to your poddying, you—— ” blustered the lad. But he did not finish his sentence, for with a spring Lu was upon him, had caught him by the collar, and was laying the sapling across his back.

She could have borne the sight of cruelty better from someone else ; from her own brother she could not, and would not bear it. In every blow there was a savage determination that it must be stopped, that the boy’s ways must be mended. There was something of the Old Testament spirit in the fury

of her onslaught. If she could only beat hard enough, she would beat the evil out of him like dust from a carpet. She would not have him like these others. Her teeth set in her lower lip till it bled. It must be stopped ; if she broke every bone in his body, it must be stopped.

The conflict was not altogether one-sided, for the boy writhed and bit, and kicked her shins to the bone. But Orde's training of wind and muscle held good, and the thrashing was carried out with the same thoroughness which accompanied all Lu did. If he grew like Jake and Barney, it should not be her fault.

"Now carry that there calf to the shed," she commanded, as the boy hung limply on her hand, pushing him away from her and pointing ; while she stood upright, her eyes blazing with excitement.

Jake and Barney, who had stopped on their way to the plough—laughing and applauding—both stared ; dimly conscious that here was something different, something outside their everyday life, altogether unexpected.

"Cripes ! she's a flaming plucked un !" declared Jake. And the verdict of the bully stood ; from that day Lu was an individual on the farm, no longer a drab nonentity.

Swaying dizzily, Harold stooped for the calf, which was still lying on its side ; while the cow licked it over, lowing dolorously, and regardless of all else.

Then, as suddenly as in the old days, Lu relented. The boy had got his punishment ; it was over and done with. Besides, his back would not be in a pleasant state for carrying anything yet awhile ; and, with her hand on his shoulder, she pushed him gently to one side.

"Let be ; I'll take it," she said. Then, stooping, hoisted the supine creature on to her own back and staggered off with it, her legs trembling beneath her.

Despite her victory, however, Lu's heart was heavy through the rest of the day. After all, Harold was hers : the one human being connected with her old life, with those others whom she loved ; and watching till she saw him go to fetch up the horses, between nine and ten that night, she followed with a Johnny-cake, which she had secreted as a peace-offering.

But the boy would have nothing to do, either with her or

her gift. He could have endured the thrashing, could even have endured being thrashed by a girl. But what was unendurable was the knowledge that the men had seen what occurred, that his newly-acquired manhood should be lost by the scene they had witnessed, while all their admiration was for Lu, for her strength and pluck. This was one of those unforgivable sins which only loomed the larger as time passed.

There was the sin of his father and mother against him, the sin of Orde in sending him to the farm, no whit diminished by the fact that he was really as happy as he could be in any surroundings ; and now there was Lu, who had turned upon him, as he expressed it. Three reasons for a sullen, black resentment that nothing could shake.

It was after dinner, the second day at the farm, that Lu had fetched up a calf for the first time, and she never forgot the experience.

The men had all gone off to the field, Harold among them ; and Mrs. Mackensie stood in the doorway of her room directing the new girl, loosening her bodice and undoing her stays, meanwhile, as a preliminary to her afternoon nap.

" You can heap all the dishes in the pan, then scrub the table, an' use the same water for them afterwards. You'll have to learn to be savin' o' water——" she was beginning, when a shout drew her to the veranda.

It was Harold, bellowing some message ; approaching nearer and nearer till he saw her, then halting with his hands to his mouth.

" There's a cow calved down by the scrub, in the three-corner paddock."

" Hadn't you the sense to bring it up ? Just you be off and get it !"

" The boss said as how I was to go straight back."

" Then tell the boss——" began the woman, then stopped. The new boy might be fool enough to repeat what was said, and she veered, adding : " A' right " ; then returned to the kitchen, still grumbling.

" As if there weren't enough to be done in the house without sending my girl off after his cows ; an' not a bit o' wood chopped for me, however I beg and pray for it. You know the belt o' scrub, down to the right," she went on, turning to Lu,

"through the slip-rail, and a three-cornered paddock along side o' it?"

Lu nodded; scrubbing with both hands, her teeth clenched.

"There's a cow calved down there. You get along and bring 'em up. If the calf won't walk you'll have to carry it." And moving to her room she shook her loosened garments on to the floor, and stretched herself on her bed with a yawn. "Get along, now, or the flies 'ull be at the calf's eyes."

"A'right." Drying the table, Lu picked up her sun-bonnet, and passed out into the shimmering heat, through the slip-rails, and down the hill towards the belt of scrub; guided, as she neared it, by the sound of a lowing; more ominous, to her ears than the bellow which she dreaded.

As the girl rounded the corner of the scrub she saw the pair she was in search of, the tiny calf rocking from side to side on its long legs, while the mother licked it with anxious care; and, circling round till she got behind them, extended her arms, and "shooed" to try and drive them up the hill. Then, as neither cow nor calf took the least notice, drew nearer and gave the little thing a tentative push; upon which the mother lowered her head, moving it round and round in threatening circles; while Lu backed, uncertain what to do next.

But the flies were gathering in a black cloud round the calf's head. She was terribly frightened of the cow; but frightened or not, she could not stay there all day. Something had to be done; and moving forward a few steps, she waved her arms, shouted at the cow to "get out o' this;" and again shoved the calf forward.

To her amazement it moved a few steps, while the mother, ceasing to threaten, followed. With a sudden sense of victory Lu realized that she could frighten the great creature; almost as much as it could frighten her, and pushed and shouted till they were half-way up the hill, when the weak little calf fell; so obviously at the end of its strength that Lu, remembering Mrs. Mackensie's words, clasped it round the middle and staggered a step or two, the cow lowing anxiously at her shoulders.

But the calf was a dead weight, and, stumbling forward with it, the girl fell; scrambled to her feet; terrified afresh by the cow's threatening attitude; caught the sound of a loud



laugh and turned to see Jake straddling over the fence, with a hank of rope across his arm.

"That ain't the way to carry a calf. Get under it, girl, and hold its front legs on your shoulders!" he shouted. "Lord! Did anyone ever see such a way o' doin' a job; if you ain't the last thing God ever made." And, still laughing, he moved leisurely up the slope; then lifted the animal and showed Lu how to get beneath it, holding its fore-legs in either hand. "Now go ahead—an' mind the old cow don't hoist you from a'hind. Look nippy now or she'll get you! Sure as my name's Jake Harris: she'll get you," he taunted.

But nothing he said could add to Lu's terror. She could hear the cow breathing gustily at her heels; it was a mottled red and white creature with wild eyes, and one horn bent downwards, giving it a rakish air; while its bulk seemed to tower right above her, so closely that she was panic-stricken at the very thought of falling.

The sweat ran down her face in streams; her eyelids were alive with flies, to which she could not raise a hand. But she never even thought of giving in till the yard was reached, and she stumbled forward, with her burden, upon a heap of hay: rose, wiped her face with her apron, and made her way dizzily to the house.

"At last!" came an angry voice from the bedroom, the moment her foot touched the veranda: "I thought you weren't never coming. Where have you put 'em?"

"In the yard."

"What! both of 'em together? Don't you know by now that the boss don't never let the calf start on sucking? Was there ever any woman cursed with such a girl? An' none o' the dishes washed up, an' nothing done; an' me lying here perishing for a cup o' tea! Just you be off an' separate 'em, or you'll get what for when Mackensie comes along home."

It was dreadful work separating the cow and calf. All Lu's fear had returned, and she was so obviously terrified that the cow butted her in the side; at which—fortunately for herself—she lost her temper, and "shooed" it so vigorously that it retreated, and she was able to get the calf away and up into the shed with the others; where she sat on the ground, regardless of their chewing and slobbering, nursing her sore hands and brooding miserably.

"Let her wait for her blasted tea—let her get it herself if she wants it. Damn her, damn her, damn her!" she muttered savagely. Then clenched her teeth so that her jaw ached; while the tears rolled slowly down her face at the thought of Orde; of the humpy in the forest; of the wonderful rug upon which she used to sit before the fire; and above all of Win, the feel of his soft little arms round her neck, the touch of his curly head against her breast. And leaning her back against the wall she settled herself to think, with her elbows on her knees, her chin wedged tight between her hands. She must get to Win. It had got to be done, and somehow or other it could be done. She could work for him and keep him; they could build a bark humpy of their own; they could live together. She would set herself to find out the ways and means of getting to him. She would not be in a hurry; but she would do it—it had to be done. Obviously Orde had not known what a farm was like: it might be that the Home was as bad: anyhow she must find out and judge for herself.

## CHAPTER IX

EVERY day, weekday and Sunday, were alike at the farm; at least for Lu—the men's work was varied by harrowing, ploughing, sowing, and fencing. But for the girl it was dominated by the eternal getting of meals and washing of dishes, the unceasing tyranny of the cows.

Gradually she grew to be an expert milker: the number she could account for mounting steadily till she got through as many as eighteen, or even twenty, morning and evening; while the agony she suffered from aching fingers and back, gradually grew less, then ceased altogether.

But she still loathed the task—the inevitability of it. If by some fury of industry she could have milked double the number, and had the next day, or the afternoon free, she might have endured it. But even the men could not do this. Wherever they went, whatever they were doing, they must be back in time for the milking. It was as remorseless as Fate; and it brutalized them; throwing them for all interest and pleasure on the mere animal things of life. Barney was sweet-hearting with a girl on the next farm; but still

he must be back to his milking at half-past five on Sundays, and the girl must be back to hers. Small wonder that such people thought, felt, and behaved like animals ; they had little time for anything else : and were never even free from the smell of the yards.

One task, however, that the rest of the employees loathed beyond words, that of poddying the calves, gave Lu a curious sort of pleasure. She liked to feel that the little creatures watched and waited for her. That she was of use to someone.

It was Jake who taught Lu how to manage them, before breakfast the day following her arrival.

The calf shed was cool and smelt good after the glare of the outer world ; but it was so dark that for a while, Lu could distinguish nothing beyond a circle of luminous eyes. Then, as her own grew more accustomed to the half-light, she became aware of a dozen or more calves pressing round them, and moist, warm mouths slobbering over her hands and clothes.

Jake pushed his way in among the little creatures, kicking them on one side, with the bucket held of milk high, till he reached a corner. Then caught the nearest calf by the ear ; swung his leg over its neck, and thrusting it back into the angle of the wall, held its head between his knees ; and, bidding Lu keep the others back, dipped his hand in the pail and thrust it into the little creature's mouth ; cursing and hitting it over the head as it bit him ; scooping up a little more milk each time ; and finally dipping its nose into the bucket, holding it firmly so that it should not go too deep.

Some of the calves had already learnt to drink, and required little or no " finger." But few of them appeared to have any idea of distance ; they would begin to suck when their noses were a foot above the milk ; or bury them so deep that they filled their lungs ; then, throwing up their heads, squirted it all out again in a shower.

" Tip the bucket a bit : " commanded Jake, when the milk began to get low ; and tipping it too far Lu was deluged, to the man's huge delight ;—" Got you a blanky christening there ; perhaps it'll learn you when I say ' tip it a bit ' to do as yer told : " he remarked, while she raised her apron and wiped the milk out of her eyes.

But ultimately even Mackensie had little fault to find with the management of the calves; for Lu was quicker at the poddying than at anything else; perhaps because she liked it best.

Sometimes, Stumpy, the married hand, would help her, for with his one short leg he was not much good at ploughing, a fact for which Mackensie made allowance in the wage bill; but usually Lu managed it by herself.

"It's a real mucky job:" remarked Mrs. Stumpy one day—during all the years spent at the farm Lu never learnt the real name of the pair—as she leant over the half door of the shed.

Lu, surrounded by calves, sucking every portion of her raiment, was busy "giving the finger" to a heavily-built bull-calf, which seemed as if it could not master the art of drinking from the bucket; though it was old enough to bite her hand—now raw and shapeless with much poddying—till it bled.

The girl raised her head for a moment, pushed back a wisp of hair from her forehead—showing a freckled face, smeared with sweat and dirt, and great eyes set in black circles of fatigue—and stared at Mrs. Stumpy. Then gripped the calf tighter and stooped again to her task.

"Seems stupid like they don't know how to drink on their own:" pursued the woman in a gently querulous voice.

"They know right enough, if they was let to do it their own way:" retorted Lu, releasing the big calf with a smack; then pulling a tottering thing gently to her, by one ear, and thrusting its head between her knees.

"Why I believe you're fond of 'em! Most folk can't abide poddying calves."

Lu did not even glance up, she was getting more and more uncommunicative; more and more wary of having "a rise" taken out of her; but the next moment she was disarmed, as Mrs. Stumpy went on.

"Not as I mind 'em myself: they seem like children, the naturalest things about the place."

"Ain't you got no kids?"

"No."

"That's bad luck." Lu had finished the last calf, and stood up stretching herself.



"Oh, I don't know. I ain't much set on kids; they're awful for mucking up a place:" responded Mrs. Stumpy; but the indifference was overdone, and Lu knew it.

"Perhaps you'll come in an' have a cup o' tea with me one day:" went on the woman; "when you're cleaned up a bit after your work;" and she glanced dubiously at Lu's boots.

"I ain't never cleaned up;" answered the girl gruffly. "There ain't never no time. There's milking and feeding the calves, and taking the cream to the creamery. And cooking and washing up, and milking and feeding again. There's never no time for anything. Stand aside, I can't get through without mucking up your fine, clean duds, or lettin' the calves loose."

Lu's cheek was flushed, her head held high, for something in the woman's words had angered her, as did the immaculately clean print which she wore. Only that day she had been wondering miserably if there ever had been a time when she thought it necessary to wash, and comb her hair the first thing in the morning; when, catching up some chance word of Orde's, she had been careful to keep her feet as scrupulously as her hands: feet which were now swollen and blistered, stained with the dust and farm refuse which filtered in through her clumsy boots.

But as she pushed roughly by, Mrs. Stumpy put out a restraining hand.

"Now then—don't you be vexed. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings. You come straight along with me now an' I'll give you a cup o' tea. Bless my soul, why you're little more than a child; it's fair awful the way they work you."

"I'm a'right:" Lu's tone was gruff; but for all that she was weakening: she wanted to see the inside of Mrs. Stumpy's house; besides, the little woman represented the one note of personal nicety to be found in the place.

"Well you just come along to show there ain't no ill-feeling."

"The missus'll curse if I don't get the separator washed right away."

"Mrs. Mackensie is a very vulgar, coarse-mouthed woman:" responded Mrs. Stumpy primly. "I don't know what possessed Jim to settle down to work for cockies, they ain't no

class whatever. And he real book-learned, you should just see the volumes we have in our place."

"I'll come," said Lu. The thought of the books drew her: to the end of her life she never cared much for reading: she lacked the patience, was all alert for the real things of life. Books, as such, were nothing to her, unless they spoke through Orde's sonorous tones. But their very scent and touch was pregnant with memories; she loved to handle them, to turn over their pages; and sat in Mrs. Stumpy's immaculately neat, one-roomed hut with "Lady Audley's Secret" on her lap, while she drank her tea. Though, somehow, even Stumpy's books looked different to those she had been accustomed to: with closer lines, narrower margins and gayer covers.

The little interior smelt of soap and blazed with Christmas cards and coloured pictures from illustrated pictures; while everything was so draped with crewel-work, patch-work and woollen crochet—even the plate from which Lu ate her scone being covered with a d'oyley, composed of little rounds of pink calico, painstakingly cut up and joined together again—that it was a wonder any grown man or woman could possibly move in such a place, without being hung with trophies from every button.

Mrs. Stumpy had been bred and born in the town; and despite twenty years of bush life, was a townswoman still, to the very tip of the little finger she quirked over her cup. She was small and flat-chested, neat and drab and straight-lipped. But there was something wistful in her brown eyes that attracted Lu; besides, she was different from anyone else at the farm; and the girl longed for variety, however unexciting, as some people long for fresh air.

Thus, if she could get a clear moment to herself, after dinner when Mrs. Mackensie was asleep, or in the evening when the supper dishes were done with, she would wash and clean her boots; and go and sit in the one tiny room, for the little townswoman distrusted the veranda as she did the whole face of the outer world; and listen to tales of the infinitely strange doings of people in far-away Melbourne, who seemed to bear no relation whatever to anyone in real life, as Lu knew it.

They never talked of the farm, of the crops, or the animals.

Indeed Lu scarcely spoke at all, but listened in a sort of pleasant maze to Mrs. Stumpy's tales of weddings and funerals, with intimate details of clothes worn on such occasions ; the complete description of everything in her own wedding outfit ; and the genealogy of everyone who made any remark concerning it. The irresistible piety of the minister at the Prahan Chapel, the shamelessness of the hussy who had married him ; the wart on his chin. The internal complications of her uncle Joshua Pane. The mania for crazy patchwork, and number of pieces and stitches her cousin Laura had put into one cushion. The paragraph in the Prahan paper when her aunt died, "she who had married onto a Macgreggor."

Curiously enough it all rested her—perhaps for the very reason that it was so detached from reality—as did the little room, which would have driven Orde crazy. She liked the picture frames of varnished shells and nuts, and pieces of cork ; the painted emu's eggs ; the ladders in bottles ; the trickle of Mrs. Stumpy's inane talk ; above all, the spotless cleanliness ; and something more, that was a bond of union between the two. For though Lu never spoke of Win she thought of him incessantly ; while at the back of Mrs. Stumpy's brown eyes was the dumb pain of a childless woman ; driven to a foolish worship of inanimate things.

Orde had left Lu the address of the Home where Win had been sent ; and, getting a penny from Mrs. Stumpy, in return for finding eggs, she wrote, and posted a letter in the little township when she took the cream. But no answer came : perhaps it never reached its destination ; perhaps, if it did, it was unreadable. But there it was ; though the girl went on doggedly inquiring at the post office, day after day ; even when all hope seemed long over.

Thus, the summer passed ; a dreary empty blaze, packed with labour from morning to night ; but still empty and apparently reasonless, with nothing to show for it all.

The season was a dry one, clear water being served out with a niggardly hand ; while the one interest of the day seemed to centre in tapping the tanks ; and listening, to judge by the sound, how low the contents had sunk. As the supply of clean water ran out, Lu did her washing in the open, by the side of the dam, spasmodically helped by Mrs. Mackensie.

But, despite all her toiling under the remorseless sun, things seemed but little whiter when they were finished, than when they were begun, for the water was yellow with mud.

At last the worst of the summer ended in a heavy thunder-storm and deluge of rain ; which awoke the girl from her apathy, and the ruck of toil into which she had sunk, stupified by the heat.

During her early days at the farm there had been constant disputes as to whose duty it was to drive the cart to the creamery, five miles away ; and fired with the idea that by keeping in touch with the town she could, in some measure, keep in touch with Win also, Lu volunteered for the task, to Mrs. Mackensie's disgust.

But then nobody minded Mrs. Mackensie ; her curses, her rages and complaints were as indefinite as her figure ; while it was her husband who ruled the farm, half her size and height—a thin-lipped, foxy little man of ceaseless activity. It suited Mackensie that Lu should go with the cream, leaving the men free for other work. As for his wife's plea, that the girl was needed in the house, nothing ever could, or would, better the hopeless dirt and disorder which there reigned supreme.

Not that Mackensie cared ; he would spend an immense sum on a stud bull ; on the new silo, or anything that meant the making of more money. But for the ordinary decencies of life he would not disburse a penny, more than was absolutely necessary. Thus the cart, with which Lu drove to the creamery, was the laughing-stock of all the rough boys and men who gathered there. For the tyres were lashed on with string, one shaft broken and bound to an unbarked sapling ; while other parts were repaired with scraps of rope, raw hide, dog's chain and hoop iron. The old horse, Trumper, was equally dilapidated, with two broken knees ; for though Mackensie bred, or bought, only first-class horses, when once their market value was gone he worked them remorselessly.

But for all that the raw-boned old chestnut could still go like the wind. And perched on the top of the cans, or standing with feet wide apart, Lu drove him furiously ; racing the other carts on their way home ; shouting as the men shouted ; flapping the reins, for she never needed to touch the whip,



and wildly exhilarated by the pace. Indeed these were the only times she felt that she really lived: when the cart swayed beneath her, the tins thumped and rattled, and the wind sung past her ears.

In the new spirit of enterprise, engendered by the cooler weather, Lu found out at what time the Melbourne trains passed, halting at the little siding for cases of butter, tins of milk and cream, or an occasional human passenger.

She began to collect pennies; very slowly, mostly by holding the men's horses outside the hotel on their way from the creamery. But the fare to Melbourne was a heavy one; and the amount required still appeared very far off, when she heard one farm hand recounting to another how he had come up country, one night, hidden among the empty milk cans.

If he could come up among empty milk cans, why should she not go down among full ones, thought Lu; and took to passing round by the station on her way out of the township each day; asking innumerable questions and watching the lie of the trains; one of which she particularly noticed, was always standing empty on a siding.

"Don't that one never do nothing?" she inquired of a porter.

"My oath! An' when you're asleep, too! She goes out at seven each evening, and to town with the afternoon milk; an' straight back here. But she don't go no further; reckon she thinks she's done her spell o' work by then:" and he laughed at his own joke; then stared after Lu as she walked away; sprang into the cart and set Trumpeter off at a hand gallop, to make up for lost time.

"That's the girl as used to come asking for letters;" remarked the postmistress, who was on the platform waiting for the morning train. "Seems as though she'd got a maggot in her brain, always askin' for some'ut."

"Fine girl though. They all gets like that atween the trains and the post; a sort o' hankering arter more life; or getting a husband."

"A rag-bag like that?"

"Well, I don't know; she's a fine girl. I won't not go so far as to say I'd marry her myself—" began the porter, then hesitated, while the postmistress noticed that his eyes were bright as he passed his hand over his loose-lipped mouth.

Next day he offered Lu a shilling to go and see his hut, but she refused ; for she was as suspicious of anything for which no definite equivalent was demanded, as a horse at any unexpected measure of oats. Besides, she had learnt all she wanted. It was the last week in May. In another month it would be dark by six o'clock. She could slip away from the farm before the milking started ; hide behind the piles of timber at the edge of the line ; watch her opportunity, and creep in among the milk cans directly the train was loaded. She could run, and jump and climb as well as any man ; she could squeeze into a smaller space. It would all be easy enough ; but she must wait till the days shortened.

May crept slowly to an end. The mornings and nights were cold now. Sometimes when Lu went out at five o'clock, to help fetch up the cows, the ground beneath her feet was crisp with frost. Once more the smell of the world was clean and fresh ; filling her lungs and clearing her brain ; while she welcomed each added moment of darkness, as drawing her nearer to Win.

Every night when she went to bed, she deliberately set herself to live through that first meeting. He would be playing in a garden with a lot of other children—perhaps the sort of garden described in "The Romance of the Rose." And someone would say : "Winthorpe Tempest, here's your sister come for you :" and with that half-cry, half-laugh which she knew so well, and which always reminded her of a magpie's note, he would scramble to his feet ; and they would both run ; she with her arms open, till he was enfolded within them.

At the very thought she would hug herself, with an actual glow where the child's dear little body would press against hers ; would feel the quick beat of his heart, and the soft fluff of his yellow head beneath her chin.

The rest was all vague. She did not suppose that Melbourne was much bigger than the township—a mere fringe of weather-board houses ; a store and hotel, hanging round the creamery and station. She would find, or build, a hut where they could both live. And she would work ; and they would drink their tea out of china cups, and Win should learn to read.

Then, one day, they would see a ship come sailing up to the edge of the town. And there would be Orde ; and they would

all be together again. All excepting Harold, who, as Lu now realized, never could, or would, be really one of themselves.

Lu hugged her secret to herself. Through all Mrs. Mackensie's complainings, Mackensie's bitter fault-finding and Jake's brutal taunts; through the trickle of Mrs. Stumpy's small talk—there was always the thought—"They don't know, nobody knows. In a month I shall be gone; in a week—in a day." The thought ran like wine through her veins, banishing cold and fatigue.

She seemed to have waited so long that, when the last morning in May actually dawned, Lu found it impossible to believe the end had really come. She had fixed the first of June for her departure, and never even thought of changing the date; but somehow it all seemed to have grown vague and dreamlike.

Her bundle was ready the night before, and hidden in the corner beneath her bed; the three faded green smocks, worn and patched; and the few miserable garments Mackensie had purchased out of the money Orde left for the purpose: all tied up together in an apron.

That last night Lu had not even closed her eyes. She was rigid with excitement; her nerves strung up to such a pitch that the surface of her skin felt raw.

She had not thought much of God since that night when Julian had first shown her the Southern Cross. But now, as she centred her whole intelligence on the business in hand—determined to guard against any accident, to make use of any extraneous power—such as the darkness, and the cold which would cause the men to hurry over their work—she bethought herself of Him. "The gods" had vanished for her with the Arcadian farm. They were beautiful; but they had grown unbelievable. On the other hand the Jewish deity of blood and thunder, and hate and fierce jealousy, fitted life as it was; and she attempted a bargain, even went on her knees for it.

"If You'll only let me get to Win I'll love You always. I'll always be good. I'll believe in You. But if You don't I'll hate You: so there! Hate You always; all my life, an' when I'm dead an' all!"

Next day the postmistress hailed Lu as she passed and

handed her a letter for Mrs. Mackensie ; a long, uninteresting-looking envelope which might have been a bill.

As the girl passed through to the back of the house to gather what remnants of breakfast she could find—the inevitable cold mutton, and stewed tea—she threw the letter to her mistress, who was sitting at the table in the front kitchen.

“ Is that all ? ”

“ Yes.”

Mrs. Mackensie picked up the letter, turned it round and round suspiciously in her fingers ; held it up to the light. At length, taking a pin from her hair tore it open : pored over it for some time ; then called.

“ Lu ! Lu ! ” Her voice was querulous, and she looked up almost angrily as the girl appeared in the doorway ; then bent her head again over the letter.

“ Such dashed writing as never was ! Where they pick up their learnin’ bests me. But there it is—nothing but trouble and worry from morning to night ! There’s Mackensie on again about that roan cow ; as though it were my fault her goin’ dry. An’ now this—— But you’d better read it for yourself ” ; and, throwing the sheet of paper across the table, she rose and thrust her feet into her shoes. “ Tellin’ me to break it, too. I like that, everything on my shoulders. You’d best get that muck o’ dishes cleared away out o’ the back kitchen : it ’ull be dinner-time afore we know where we are : ” she went on peevishly, as she moved towards the door of her room ; then half-turned, curiously regarding Lu, who had taken in the contents of the letter at a single glance. “ One thing’s lucky, you won’t not want black. It’s too far away ; no one ’ull know.”

“ It ain’t true—it can’t be true ! ” said Lu, rigidly upright, her shoulders high, her arms pressed against her body ; one hand clutching the paper. “ It’s a lie—it’s a damned lie ! ”

“ Its’ true, right enough. There’s the stamp of the Institute on it, an’ all. Died, on the twenty-seventh o’ menim—menin—the Lord only knows what the word is.”

“ It’s not true ! ”

“ What should they write for if it weren’t ? Not that I can see as it makes much difference to you ; ten to one you’d never have seen him again.”

With a sudden movement Lu lifted the letter, and tore it in



half ; tore it again and again, and then dropped the morsels of paper on the floor.

"Then if it's true, there ain't no God—'less He's sitting up there guying us. But there ain't no God—there never was." And she laughed shrilly : then caught her hands to her heart and beat upon it. "Nor gods neither—just us crawlin' here !"

"Well I must say ! 'Pon my word you're a nice specimen to belong to a Christian country !" ejaculated Mrs. Mackensie in pious horror. "Blaspheming as never was."

But Lu had turned towards the back kitchen and was piling dishes into the wash-up pan.

Nothing mattered. Win was dead. Had died four days ago, while she was counting the hours until she should hold him in her arms. Was dead all the while that she had prayed the night before. If there was a God what a horrible joke it was ! The sort of joke Jake himself might have played upon her. To let her go on praying like that when all the time he was dead !

## CHAPTER X

WIN's death did not put Lu "off her work" as Mrs. Mackensie had feared ; she did not brood or mope, there was never the sign of a tear in her eye. For all that she was changed. She worked like a fury, but she would not be put upon : she answered back and cursed back and was afraid of nothing—simply because she cared for nothing. The thrashing she administered to Harold had given her a lift in the estimation of all the farm people : the fierce pride with which she disdained any sign of grief gave her another. And then came the affair of the brumbie—a chestnut with immense width of chest and height of hind quarters, one white foot and a flicker of red and white in its eye.

Lu had been two years on the farm by then ; and through all this time Jake had remained unaltered. Barney shaved on Sundays, changed his clothes and took his girl out for a ride. But Jake's costume never varied ; apparently he neither washed, or trimmed his coarse straggling beard ; while his eyes were always bloodshot and resentful, his head poked forward aggressively between his great shoulders. He never talked,

save to discuss the merely sexual points of some animal ; then his face flushed heavily, his eyes glowed ; while his whole means of expressing any emotion seemed to be by a bellowing laugh or curse. But though he laughed at others, he was fiercely resentful of any mirth at his own expense, and in a state of constant warfare with Stumpy, who, in spite of his quiet ways, had a snicking tongue of his own.

Lu had always loathed Jake—especially since she had seen him kick a calf to death ; in a burst of fury, because it had coughed its milk back in his face.

But for all that there was a curious bond between the two ; for hate, jealousy, and animosity can constitute a bond as surely as love. In a fashion Jake ruled the girl by daring her ; by her very scorn at the thought that he could get the better of her. He dared her into not showing any fear of the cows, even of the bull : dared her into riding every horse in the place, and finally into jumping the brumbie over the fence of the mustering yard.

Curiously enough the horses had not frightened Lu, as did the cows : she seemed to understand them instinctively, handling them with firmness and skill ; while Harold, never at his ease with them—losing his temper, partly from fear—fretted them into a lather. But the chestnut brumbie was a different affair altogether, from any of the other horses. To some extent Jake had broken it ; and with much rearing and kicking it would allow him to mount. But none of the other men dared go near it ; for it was not merely wild, it was savage : a real man-eater.

One close summer day Lu happened to be riding Trumpeter up from the three-cornered paddock, sitting loosely astride, without a saddle, when she met Jake on the big chestnut, going with a wicked sideways motion and snatching at his boot. The man was at his best on a horse, as he well knew ; besides his sluggish nature was stirred by his victory over the brumbie, and he hailed Lu.

“ Get off an’ walk ; you’ll get along quicker than on that old cut-the-wind.”

“ Get off yourself, an’ let me have the horse you’re so proud of, bully Jake. You think as no one else can ride it ? Yah !”

Jake gave a bellowing laugh. Then with a sudden movement flung himself from the saddle and stood ; holding the

reins close under the brumbie's jaw, while he snatched and circled.

"There you are. No one can say I'm not willing to oblige a lady. Eh—not so blanky keen now? All blow, eh?"

"No;" with a movement as sudden as his own Lu dropped from her horse and stood facing him. She had not expected this; but she did not mean to let Jake get the better of her.

"Hold him while I get on:" she said and, passing round behind the man, gathered the reins over the chestnut's head and put her hand on the saddle. Got one foot into the stirrup, stood for a moment clinging on to the brumbie's side, while he swung round rearing, with Jake hanging on to the bridle: flung over the other leg, and scrambled into the saddle.

"Le' go!"

In a moment the animal's head was between his legs and he was bucking furiously. But somehow the girl hung on; even put out her hand for Jake's whip, which he handed at the length of his arm.

"You'd best get off afore he throws you:" he jeered.

Lu was bent double upon the saddle; her toes were barely touching the stirrup-irons. There was no science in her riding; she seemed to be clinging on with every nerve, every morsel of flesh; but still she clung.

"He'll not throw me: you're not the only one as can ride—for all your blow:" she gasped in jerks. "I'll best him—I'll best him, see!" and raising the switch she brought it down with all her might across the chestnut's quarters.

The effect was instantaneous. For a moment it seemed as though the brute swung in mid air, his legs gathered together beneath him. Then he was off, with his head low, the bit between his teeth; thundering down to the very end of the narrow paddock, where he bucked furiously: wheeled in a semi-circle and came pounding up again: the dry soil scattering in a cloud of dust from beneath his hoofs, enveloping the two in a sunlit haze.

Up and down he went, again and again: an extended streak of chestnut and white, with intervals of bucking, during which horse and girl mingled into one rearing, gyrating mass.

At first Jake jeered, confident that Lu must be shaken to the ground from sheer exhaustion, if from nothing else. Then,

as the battle continued he applauded so loudly that the others came running out to see the sport.

Once more the two shot by him ; but the chestnut had ceased to buck and was galloping sullenly, while Lu plied the whip. Again they circled the paddock, and came thundering up the slight incline towards the place where Jake was astride upon the fence, a solid chock-and-block affair.

At the sight of it a sudden thought leapt to Lu's mind—already aflame with victory, with the sense that she was not frightened, though drunk with excitement, had not been from the very first moment when she felt the brumbie's heaving sides between her knees.

She would show Jake ; she would show them all—all those others, of whom, flashing by, she gained a vision of open eyes and mouths—that she was afraid of nothing.

She would jump the fence on which Jake sat. Would frighten him in his turn ; kill him if she could, she did not care. The blood was thundering through her ears, her hands bleeding. But she was conscious of no fatigue only an immense sense of triumph, as she brought her whip down upon the chestnut's hind quarters ; then, as he swerved, upon his shoulders ; dragging him round : forcing him to face the fence.

Again and again he swerved and reared ; and again and again Lu brought him round, while Jake and the others shouted to her to desist. But by now they were all out of it. The fight was between her and the brumbie ; he had got to jump that fence if they both died in the attempt.

And in the end they did it, for shaking his head the chestnut gathered himself together beneath the hail of blows ; and, with a suddenness, which nearly unseated Lu, rose at the fence ; topped it : caught one hind foot on the rail : pecked on his nose : stumbled a few steps while Lu tugged at the reins : gathered himself together, and stood dripping with sweat, his nose between his knees, trembling from head to foot.



## CHAPTER XI

"I AM not frightened of anything now," said Lu to herself, the day after she had defeated the brumbie. She still loathed the cows; but she despised them. She did not care a snap of the fingers for Mrs. Mackensie; and Mackensie himself left her alone, for she worked like two, and that was all he required of her; while she certainly was not afraid of Harold. Though curiously enough, somewhere at the back of her mind, there was a sort of fear which was, in a measure, connected with him: the bewildering fear of her own identity; the absolute loneliness of this "I" which had once been a mere fraction of a family. The realization that, as far as she herself was concerned, other people, even her own brother, revolved round her, none touching her; while she sustained her own equilibrium with an almost terrifying effort. Not by doing anything very definite, but merely by not being afraid: by not allowing other people to engulf her; for she realized to the full the fate of all weak things in the rough world where she found herself.

Sometimes she would overheat the bucket of milk for the calves, and cool it by swinging it, full as it was, round her head: a performance needing a certain amount of nerve; for if she hesitated for a moment the outward pull ceased, and she was deluged with the boiling fluid. That was something like life, it needed all her strength and decision to keep her own place, her own definite centre; not to become a tool for all these others: overwhelmed by them. Though she could not have put it in these words; her one desire being, as she would have said, to keep her "end up;" not to be "put upon:" to "give best" to nobody; and this could only be accomplished by overcoming her fears, one after another.

At the time of her fifteenth birthday, Lu was free of all sense of fear: absolutely independent, living in an isolated world of her own. For since Win's death she had refused to go near Mrs. Stumpy; and was not now on speaking terms with the little woman, whom she re-christened "Softy." In reality, however, it was her own softness that she feared; Mrs. Stumpy and her ways reminded her of other things, and she

wanted to put memory far behind her : to harden herself past all feeling. And indeed, for the time being, Lu was a man-creature ; with no feelings, impulses or tastes that were not wholly masculine ; even losing her tenderness for the calves, and all the young things it had been her delight to mother.

But a few months later a change came and her courage weakened. It was the spring, she told herself resentfully. That spring which she had always hated.

But as the summer advanced her masculine spirit grew even less. She became tender again ; she liked to feel the calves mouthing her over ; a curious hysterical lump came into her throat at the sight of anything helpless or in pain. The peace of the early dawn, or still starlit night touched her almost to tears. She became a creature of sudden moods, of quick feelings ; with a hunger for affection, which even drove her to try and renew her friendship with Mrs. Stumpy, arid as it had been. Above all, she became afraid again. Not physically afraid ; but mysteriously afraid of inexplicable things ; a fear chiefly aroused by a certain look she came to recognize in men's eyes.

It was over a year ago since the porter had offered her a shilling to go to his hut with him. She had thought nothing of it at the time, merely refusing because she imagined that he was " taking a rise " out of her. But one night, about this time, she awoke with a sudden remembrance of his expression which turned her sick.

Then a drummer came to the farm, selling picture Bibles on the instalment plan, and was given dinner in the kitchen ; chatting with Mackensie afterwards, following Lu with his eyes as she passed to and fro gathering up the dishes.

Later he tracked the girl to the stack-yard and found her sitting with her back to a rick ; for Lu demanded, and took, her midday rest now, as well as Mrs. Mackensie, though invariably out of doors.

He was a smooth, pink-cheeked young man ; with a small fair moustache, dressed in city clothes. And Lu had glanced at him wistfully ; moving with a straightened back and heightened colour when she felt his eye upon her. Here at least was something different, something apart from the gross animal world with which she was surrounded : and she was

frankly delighted when he opened his pack, and offered to show her some of the pictures.

But as he pressed close to her, under the pretence of seeing better, something in the man's hot breath, and the touch of his shoulder against hers, nauseated her, and she moved away.

But the drummer caught at her wrist:—"Look here!" he was fluttering the pages sharply over; "you needn't be shy, I won't hurt you: it's only the Bible, but there's some hot stuff in it—Look!" and he pointed, then tittered.

Involuntarily Lu had followed the man's finger, but, as she read the verse he indicated, she jerked her wrist away from his flabby grasp.

"You beast—you beast!" she gasped: her heart was thumping and she burnt from head to foot. She was afraid, horribly afraid—though the wretched little creature had not half her strength—and turning she ran: round the ricks, and through the milking-sheds; lurking among the carts, in terror of pursuit. And finally, making her way to the calf-shed, sank down on a heap of straw, with her back to the wall.

Here was the sweet, clean breath; the warm moist lips, the very touch of which soothed her; while from the yard outside sounded the lowing of a bereaved mother. Helpless youth and maternity, the only pure things left in her world; or so it had seemed to Lu.

From her first week at the farm she had been made aware of all the facts of life. There was never the faintest idea of hiding anything from her: everything occurred openly, and was discussed with the most brutal outspokenness; which, after all, is not the worst way of gaining knowledge of a certain kind.

But, perhaps because she had none of the usual susceptibilities and sentimentalities of her age and sex, Lu's comprehension stopped at this. She had no idea of putting two and two together, of realizing that the same laws dominated the human and the animal world. Maternity, a child of her own to take the place of Win, to hug against her heart, had been a growing dream with her; but never for a moment did she think of it as being dependent on the will of some man; as having the same beginning as the calves, whose coming was so frankly arranged for.

Then at last, something in the verse to which the drummer

had pointed, in his whole manner and touch, opened the flood-gates of knowledge, supplied the missing connection ; and she realized her own growth, the meaning of the coarse remarks that the men had intended for compliments, the look in their eyes ; and hating them, so hated anything which they represented. Life had been poisoned for her ; there was nothing left : even childhood was smirched.

If the girl had known any men of decent refinement it would all have come differently : she would have realized the paramount facts of sex under the glamour of love : but, as it was, it appeared stark and utterly unbeautiful.

True, there was Stumpy and his wife ; but the childless little woman was so apart from the realities of life, and her partner so maimed, that they were naturally counted out. And then who remained ? Mackensie, whose fault-finding was infinitely preferable to his rare jocular moods : and Jake and Barney ; and a fossicker she had several times come across, when she took the cows to a distant paddock which ran beside the creek. And the men and boys whom she met outside the creamery. That was all. Perhaps they were naturally no grosser than any other men ; but their life, tied down by the tyranny of dairy work, gave them no mind, or thought, for any pleasure or amusement, beyond the satisfaction of their animal desires. Utterly devoid as it was of art, music, books, sport or games of any description ; intolerably isolated ; and, for those who lived on the more distant farms, lacking all society, beyond that of the overworked, draggle-tailed farmer's wife.

Lu was grown to her full height now : a well-balanced five foot eight ; with a straight back, and flat shoulders, which even the constant milking failed to round : slender waist, small hips and rounded bosom. She could never have been a classical beauty ; her face was more heart-shaped than oval, with wide forehead and straight black brows ; while her nose was tilted, her red mouth—with its square corners—over large. But there was a defiant challenge in her whole face, and the poise of her figure, which caught the eye ; and then something wistful, some underlying hints of tenderness, which held it ; though the farm men saw only the rounded breast and full red lips. While, as for the girl's heart and soul, the personality inhabiting the desirable body, nobody even thought of it.



Gradually, about this time, Lu's vague fears began to be centred on Jake. It seemed that the man's eyes were always upon her, that she was possessed by them. He followed her about, among the calves and cows, at the separator ; even over her housework. At any task where two were needed he contrived to make a second ; working close against her, his hand or foot touching hers ; while he substituted rough compliments in place of the old taunts.

Gradually Lu grew obsessed by the fear of the man ; whom she found it was impossible to shake off. Once she appealed to Harold ; but the boy could not, or would not, understand, declaring that he could see nothing for her to whine about ; while if there was, he, for one, would be glad to have her " bested."

One Sunday, Jake actually made some effort to clean himself, and brought round the chestnut, now comparatively peaceful, to offer Lu a ride, which she refused. But something the man muttered about getting even with her, his manner and look, frightened her so, that when Mrs. Mackensie passed some rough joke on the subject of the bully's infatuation, Lu appealed to her :—

" I'm frightened of him ; he follows me everywhere."

" Frightened, listen to her !" jeered the woman who had been nursing an accumulation of petty grievances against Lu. " You don't take me in, my girl ! It ud do you good if you was frightened, I reckon. It might tame you into showing more respect for your elders and betters : " and she nodded, with a vindictive thrust forward of her chin.

Every evening, at this time, instead of sitting in front of the humpy, Jake lounged and smoked outside Lu's room ; the door of which had shrunk with the heat, leaving three inches, or more, between it and the main floor. This fact, as the girl discovered, constituting the main reason for the man's changed habits ; for on opening it, unexpectedly one night, she found him sprawling across the edge of the veranda, his cheek on the boards, prying beneath it.

Lu pushed a box against the door, and fastened it as best she could with string. But it all seemed a poor barricade against Jake, whose great bulk loomed all the larger for her fears. And with the feeling of looking desperately round for help, like a wild creature in a snare, she appealed to

Mrs. Stumpy ; passing over to her hut one afternoon after dinner.

But the little woman would only open a crack of the door, her narrow face peering out of the opening with compressed lips, and eyes from which every hint of softness had vanished.

"It's your own fault. If the men come after a girl, it's bound to be some'ut in herself ; the way she carries on, or looks at 'em. If a girl behaves modest, they'll leave her alone."

"I've done nothing:" Lu's cheek flamed:—"They're beasts!—they——"

"Well, look at me! Even afore I was married men never tried on any of their loose ways with me;" and Mrs. Stumpy straightened her austere figure, and tightened her lips still more, as if in conscious pride of her own unattractiveness. "If they make free with you, you've brought it on yourself with your wild ways; and mixing with that sort." And she slammed the door in the girl's face.

"A real trollope, and there's no mistake!" she reported to her husband later on. "Coming to me about those beastly men; disgustin' I call it! And a girl like that, not yet sixteen. If she'd any self-respect she'd learn how to keep the men in their places! Same as I did when I was young. They never went on with any of their nonsense after me, I can tell you that."

"No." Stumpy smoked steadily; while his placid eyes rested upon his wife with a curiously detached expression; as though he were making a totally unbiassed comparison between her and the girl of whom she spoke. He was used to her; used to moving gingerly round the doll's house which she called home: understood her, was fond of her in a tolerant fashion, which allowed fully for all she had lost by her childlessness. But there! The fact remained that she was not the sort of wife he would choose if he had his chance over again; and perhaps those other men—those men who had held back, offering no rivalry to his courtship—were wiser than he had been; recognizing the thin-blooded nature of the chastity which confronted them.

A few weeks after this one of the calves, the care of which now devolved wholly upon Lu, happened to be ill. She had fed it the last thing before she went to bed, and done all she

could for its comfort ; but, after she had been sleeping for an hour or so, she woke with a sudden, sharp realization that she had not given it a dose as she intended.

The place had been quiet for hours ; for several nights Jake had not been to her door and now everything seemed wrapped in oblivion. Thus, without a qualm of fear, Lu slipped into her skirt and shoes : and wrapping her blouse round her shoulders crept over to the calves'-shed, and in among the warmly breathing creatures ; then felt her way to the railed-off pen where the sufferer lay ; and flinging open a half-shutter, so as to flood the place with moonlight, groped along a beam, found the bottle she required and dosed the calf ; then, thinking it might be thirsty, kindled a little fire, in a hearth-place used for that purpose, warmed some milk and fed it.

All this took some time, and the girl did not hurry. It was a still, absolutely clear night, with the clean freshness of oncoming autumn in the air ; and the tiny fire, crackling and blazing in the open-fronted shed, was not unwelcome ; while, squatting on the floor as she was, the yellow flames and puffs of smoke made a pleasant picture, flickering up against the deep indigo sky.

For once the girl was curiously happy, and very much at peace with the world. And as she moved again into the open, she stood for a few moments looking around her ; for it was as if, in the absence of the cruel eyes which haunted her, she breathed a purer air ; as if a weight were lifted from her mind, and her thoughts ran more clearly and sanely.

As she neared the back veranda Lu began to run, feeling suddenly chilly ; and darting into her room drew to the door and fastened it with the string ; then stooped to pull her box to its place ; and half turning saw, to her horror, that Jake was sitting on the edge of the bed grinning broadly.

Without a word the girl swung round and began to pull frantically at the string, which she had knotted and twisted about a hook in the jamb of the door ; then finding it hopelessly entangled—blind and reasonless with terror—put her shoulder against the panelling and pushed.

But now Jake was on his feet, one arm round her, his hands over hers.

“ Leave it alone, you fool ! Don't you know I've got you

now—" he whispered huskily. " It 'ull be all right, leave it alone, you fool : no one 'ull know. Leave it alone ! "

By some means or other he had got her into the centre of the room ; had both his arms round her in the darkness. It seemed as if he engulfed her. And struggling, wild with fear, Lu forced her way back again to the door ; where he held her, pressing back her head with one arm round her neck ; and, stopping her stifled scream with his lips, kissed her again ; forgetting in his brute passion where they stood ; pushing her back against the door with all his weight upon her, so that the girl felt as though she were being stifled by the man's gross body and hot panting breath.

" Don't be a fool—you've got to give in, don't be a fool ! " Half turning to draw her to him more easily Jake's own shoulder was against the woodwork as he spoke ; and suddenly, with a crash, the string gave way, while a rush of clear air swept over Lu as she hurtled backwards ; caught at the lintel and stood there clinging to it, shaking from head to foot ; while the man shot forward ; stumbled to his knees, and then drew himself upright against one of the posts, cursing furiously ; rubbing his knee, and regardless of all save his own discomfort.

" Well I must say ! " A window on the veranda was pushed open, and Mrs. Mackensie peered out ; followed Jake with her eyes as he slunk off to his own quarters ; and then turned to Lu, who was catching her breath in sobbing gasps.

" Well ! I wonder what next ! Ain't you ashamed of yourself ? Such carryings on, waking honest people out o' their sleep."

But in a sudden fury the girl flung round upon her. " How dare you ? What have I done but slave for you all ; and what have you ever done for me ? You're all alike, beasts—brute beasts. But it's the end. I'll have no more of it. This ain't the only farm. I told you ; I asked you to help me, an' you wouldn't ; and now I'll go. There's Kelvin's, and Wells's, and any of the others ; they'll be glad enough to have me, they know how I can work. I'll not stay here with that man. I'm through with it—with all of you : " she panted, dragging her torn blouse round her shoulders with shaking hands.

" I'll go ; the first thing to-morrow I'll go."

" S'sh ! " and Mrs. Mackensie glanced hastily round to see



if her husband was still asleep. He would never forgive her if she drove Lu away ; girls who could, or would milk were difficult to find ; besides with this one there were no wages to pay. " S'sh ! don't wake Mackensie ; I was only joking. I knew it wasn't your fault, haven't I seen how you gave the fellow the go-bye."

" My fault !" ejaculated Lu contemptuously.

" Not that many mistresses 'ud look on it that way. If they heard as there was a man in a girl's room at night they'd say as she must 'a led him on, or he wouldn't not dare—they Wells's an' pious folk like that."

" Led him on, that swine ! I'll not stay on the farm with him !" The girl's voice rang high. At that moment the whole world might have heard, for all she cared ; and again her mistress glanced apprehensively behind her.

" S'sh ! Go back to bed now an' Mackensie shall speak to him in the morning. You go back to your bed, like a good girl, and you'll see what Mackensie will do, come morning."

## CHAPTER XII

BUT in the morning Mackensie only pinched Lu's cheek, and told her she must not " go turnin' his chaps heads for them " ; while his wife was stupendously arch and conciliatory, till she found that Lu's courage was all gone ; that she was white and listless, and spoke no more of leaving.

As a matter of fact the girl was too physically exhausted, by the struggle and fear of the night before to feel capable of any effort. Her strength and courage were sapped ; while she felt as though she were polluted by the very memory of Jake's kisses ; as though they must be burnt in upon her lips, for everyone to see. Even to Mrs. Mackensie she could not bring herself to again speak of what had occurred. If she left, if she went to the Wells's or Kelvin's they would know—everyone would know.

For a time, also, she was left in peace—that brooding, ominous peace during which one is always waiting for something to happen, starting at a sudden word or movement ; while she shrank so from notice, was so lifeless and colourless, that even

Barney, who had begun to pester her whenever Jake was out of sight, returned to the girl at the next farm ; and the men she met outside the creamery almost ceased to pay her any attentions. Indeed at this time, Lu's beauty and vitality burnt so low, showing as if through an opaque shade, that it no longer attracted notice.

As for Jake himself, he moved about his work without speaking to her ; though his glance held more of dislike than passion. She had baulked him, had made him look like a fool ; but she should suffer for it the first time he found her alone ; and, for all his apparent avoidance of her, he was only waiting his chance.

This chance might have come sooner than it did, save for the fact that Stumpy made it his business to champion the girl ; so that when Jake would have otherwise found her alone, there he was at her elbow : taking the big man's curses with an air of curiosity, which seemed to inquire :—" What strange sort of a beast is this ?"

One day, however, there was a load of meal to be fetched from the station ; and at dinner-time Mackensie gave the order that Stumpy was to take the waggon and team, and go for it.

With a sudden unanimity Lu's eyes and Stumpy's both turned to Jake : rested for a moment on the shock head bent close over his plate : and then met, in the mute inquiry as to what would Jake be doing if Stumpy went to town.

" There's the rest o' them posts to sink : " the lame man protested ; " an' Lu was going to help me. Why can't Jake go for the meal ? "

" Jake's on ploughing, as you know well enough. The fencing can wait ; go and get your horses hitched up. "

" Happen it 'ull rain ; there's all the holes ready dug an' it 'ull be a fine to do if they gets full o' water. "

" You do as you are told. "

With a tray on her hip Lu was moving round the table collecting the dirty plates ; while the men, having finished their meal, tipped back on their chairs.

" I won't not be ten minutes washing up an' I'll go along with you, Stumpy. I want some new stuff for an apron : " she said.

" You'll do nothing of the sort, miss, " screamed Mrs.

Mackensie: "all them calves to be seen to, and the kitchen washed, and likely enough not back to the milking neither. All them others can go as they please. But, so help me God, I'll be missus over my own girl: if there ain't no one else as considers me, I'll——"

"Suppose you try being missus over your own tongue for a change;" snapped Mackensie, rising to his feet as he spoke: "And you, my girl, you stay an' mind your own business here."

"Do I never not mind my business?" inquired Lu scornfully, swinging round upon him with the laden tray. "I'll do all your dirty jobs for you, don't you be fretting; but I'm going to town with Stumpy, for all that."

"No, you don't. Now, just you look here, young woman! You go an' take your own way, and you don't come back here. That's fair and straight: a damned sight fairer and straighter than you are, as you'll find if you goes whining round to any of the other farms here for a place. When a wench gets a name such as you have she'd best lay quiet; and not be gadding off with another woman's property."

"I'll go if I have a mind to, for anything you may say;" declared Lu sullenly; as, with flaming face, she retreated to the back kitchen and flung her tray down upon the slab. But for all that she realized she was beaten; though she washed up the dishes with a great show of haste, and then went to her room to fetch her hat and tidy herself. "I'll go for all they say. I don't care what they say and do, I'll go:" she reiterated again and again to herself. Then heard the sound of the horses being led out and the rattle of harness, as she slowly finished tying her bootlaces, and rising to her feet opened her door, in time to see Stumpy mount the wagon: touch his team with the reins and start.

But though she ran down the veranda steps, and half across the yard calling the little man, he did not draw rein; neither did Lu call very insistently, nor with any great will. For she knew that Mackensie's words had struck home: that for the sake of peace and quietness Stumpy would not dare to take her, with the thought of what the farmer's envenomed tongue would make of it to his wife. While she herself, despite all her assumptions of courage, was cowed by the man's threat. For the country seemed to have grown incredibly large and

strange at the very thought of facing it alone ; while the people to whom she might have appealed for help seemed far apart, cold and indifferent ; perhaps even more to be dreaded than Jake, for at least Jake knew that she had resisted him, and there was no knowing what these others might believe.

Fortunately the three men and Harold were all busy over the autumn ploughing. With a sense of relief the girl saw them making their way over to the new lot ; and watched the four ploughs cutting their way steadily up the long slope—which ended in a curved sky-line and sweep of grey clouds—before she dared leave the veranda ; satisfied that they were occupied for the afternoon and would, in all probability, come back together.

But soon after three o'clock Jake managed to achieve a broken rein, and with the excuse of fetching another, returned to the house ; at an hour when he knew that Lu would be in the calf-shed and Mrs. Mackensie still sleeping.

It was like a death sentence to the girl when she looked up and saw the man's heavy form darkening the half door. Though as he opened it and paused to get used to the light, she pressed back into the dark corner among the calves ; hoping against hope that he was there by some chance and would not see her.

But the next moment, as he advanced with his head thrust forward, kicking aside the calves, she realized that he had deliberately come in search of her ; and that there she was, penned up in the corner, with no possible hope of escape.

Peering forward Jake stood, with his hands thrust deep into his pockets, so close that his breath swept her face ; and then laughed. " So here you are, are you ? I reckon I've got a little account to lamb down with you, my girl. You didn't like my kisses, ah ? Then take that instead, and that, and that !" and he struck her across the mouth. " You thought I was balmy on you : that you'd get more out of me by squarking and holdin' back. Well, that's what you'll get, an' that, an' that !" And he struck her again and again at each word ; while Lu pressed back against the wall, blindly endeavoured to ward off the blows ; knowing that it was useless for her to shriek, for there was no one to hear : apparently hopeless to show fight, against such overwhelming odds.



Indeed, Jake seemed so close, so big, that she had neither space nor breath for resistance.

"Too fine a lady for the touch of my hands, eh? Then take that instead!" And moving a step back Jake lifted his heavily booted foot.

It did not give Lu a moment; but it was enough. She was free of his overwhelming nearness; the heat of his gross body, the touch of his hands.

The savage spirit of the cornered animal flared up in her. Besides that, she had space to move, and her brain started to work again, with a clear spurt, like a struck match.

Pressing back flatly into her corner she had felt something hard, which leant obliquely across it: had released the iron bar with which she drove home the hurdles; and kicked back, hoping it would fall; allowing her that extra six inches of retreat, which—stupified with terror—she had imagined was capable of giving sanctuary.

But her mood was changed: the touch of the cold iron through her flimsy skirt was no longer an impediment, it meant safety. No, more—a possible revenge.

The heavy boot shot out, straight at her, with a splutter of filth from the shed floor.

But Lu, feeling for the bar, flung a little on one side; and the blow caught her on the hip instead of the stomach—where it was aimed—though with a sickening force.

It was the end, however. For as Jake staggered a moment to recover his footing on the greasy stones, Lu got the bar tight in both hands, and raised it.

"By God, I'll kill you!" It was what she meant. The desire, not only to kill but to mutilate, leapt up in her like a flame.

The man, recovering himself, saw her lips drawn back in a straight line above her teeth and snatched at the iron. But she was too quick for him; and though she missed his head it came down across one shoulder; with such force that the pain ran through him, as though it had been red-hot.

"Drop it—God damn you drop it!" Again he snatched, with the other hand this time. But he could neither reach Lu nor her weapon; though somehow she got in another blow across the back of his upraised arm, shattering the bone.

She was out of the corner now, swinging the bar round her

head. It seemed to Jake that she was everywhere ; her lithe quickness giving her an immense advantage over the heavily built man. There seemed twenty girls, twenty bars of iron, as he tried to rush her : breathing heavily, his head thrust forward, the sweat pouring down his face : half blind with rage and fear.

There was no knowing what she would do. He had seen men like that : mad to kill. Besides she was between him and the door. She was everywhere.

Suddenly she was laughing. She was no longer afraid. He could live for all she cared, it was nothing to her. She realized her own strength and suppleness ; her clean length of limb, and hard muscles, in vivid comparison with the man's whisky-sodden bulk. What a fool she had been to fear him so ! What a fool he looked dodging from side to side, and, cursing with one hand to his shoulder !

" You're a devil—a devil. An' I could kill you. Crack your skull like an egg—like an egg—crrk !" Her voice had risen to a triumphant sing-song, as she stood swinging the bar round her head. Backed by the open door : drawn upright ; every muscle taut : quivering from head to foot—though not with fear.

" But you can go—this time, I reckon." And she flung on one side, with a flaunting movement of the hips. " Get !" she said. And shooed him as he moved by her—with his shock head thrust forward—as though he had been an intruding fowl. Then let the iron swing against his elbow as he passed : and shooed him again.

### CHAPTER XIII

It was open war now. Lu's face was bruised : her lower lip was cut almost to the teeth, and smarted horribly when she spoke or ate ; while she watched Jake maliciously ; his clumsy attempt to cut up his meat at the table, with one arm in a sling ; the way the brumbie mastered him. The brumbie which was said to have been responsible for the broken arm.

But she was no longer afraid. Though she knew Jake would like to kill her. For now it was open war ; free from the

horror of sex: and she moved about her work in a sort of triumphant glory: her cheeks shining, her eyes ablaze. Went to bed and slept the moment her head touched the pillow.

But she awoke—that was the worst of it—as suddenly as though someone had touched her. And lay awake, night after night, for two or three hours, obsessed by the horror of life. By the feeling that, though she had beaten Jake and his desires, she was by no means at an end with it all—that the world was full of such people.

With this thought came a deadly weariness: an utter distaste for the fight—for the eternal struggle to keep her end up. And a passionate, even recurring hunger for Win; the well-remembered feel of his little body against hers, his clinging arms round her neck. She was as full of every sort of softness and sweetness as the springtime; and yet could only live by fighting and opposing.

It all weakened her. Her fierce “touch-me-not” bearing flagged: at first in private, then noticeably to all who watched her.

After a while Jake departed to another farm: ostensibly on account of a quarrel he had managed to pick with Mac-kensie, and at first Lu was triumphant: but she missed the sense of something definite to fight against. Besides there was another man in his place, who watched her from out of the corners of his eyes.

An intense lassitude overcame her. It seemed as if everything was going on always the same: life was an affair of endurance: there was nothing else.

Then one day when she was in the cow-shed milking—with that quick decision which was sufficiently habit to overcome her langour—she heard a voice in the yard outside call her name.

“Lu—Lu!”

The rounded tones ran like wine through her veins. It seemed as if the gates of life were suddenly flung open before her, showing a glittering, illumined plain.

Still she did not move her head from the cow’s side, but hung waiting till she heard it again.

“Lu—Lu!” Then in a petulant undertone: “Ye gods! what a travesty of the “Sleeping Beauty’s” palace. Are

they all dead—buried? Pheugh! and rotting too by the stench of it.”

But now the pail was over, with a stream of milk through the straw, the stool kicked on one side—for it was unmistakably Orde’s voice, Orde’s very mode of expression—and Lu was out of the shed, and upon him: clinging to his arm, laughing and crying. Suddenly alive again: a creature of infinite fears and joys.

“Julian! Julian! Oh Julian! I thought you were never not coming again. Julian, is it you—you? How long you’ve been. Win’s dead—dead; an’ there was nobody left.” The words poured forth; the source of all her griefs first. Then:—

“Did you know what it was like? Did you—no, you couldn’t! There’s people, no—not people, beasts—There was a man—— You mustn’t go, you must never go away again; you mustn’t leave me here. Julian, you mustn’t leave me here.”

Suddenly she grew frantic and shook him by the arm; her eyes wild with anxiety.

“You’ll not leave me. Never, never—you must promise.” And she shook him again: the tears streaming down her face. Then pulled herself upright with the sudden memory of how Orde had hated to see anyone cry—even little Win, taking it as a sort of personal grievance—and so jerked out a broken laugh. “It’s not—it’s not like the farms in Arcadia, as you told me of.”

“Can you ever forgive me? Child what a place! What a Gehenna! What an abomination of desolation! But I didn’t know; I never guessed. Lu! you realize that I didn’t know? And Win—poor little Win!—I heard as I came through town. I didn’t forget you; ’pon my soul I never forgot you. Of course you must come away; but the devil is——” and he drew a little back, held her at arm’s length and stared at her, half in admiration, half in dismay:—“I remembered you as a child and you—you presumptuous creature! Why, you’re nearly as tall as I am! But it wasn’t my fault!” he repeated, while the old peevish note of self-defence crept into his voice. “How was I to know there were such people, such a place? Nobody could say it was my fault!”



"Nothing was nobody's fault—it's just the way things happen." Suddenly Lu's emotion and fears seemed to have become ridiculous to her. "Things happen:" she repeated: her whole being hanging alert on his every shade of expression. How little he had changed, this dear protector and friend! How wonderful, how different from anyone else he still was! And, yet, there was a difference—something which made her choose her words warily. Though not till years later did she realize that the change lay in the fact that he was less of the open air: less virulent; more hectic, petty, exacting. More than ever the one actor on a stage which had insensibly narrowed. "It's all right now—you've come." And she mustered a smile: then put her hand to her lip, which had cracked again, and was oozing a little trickle of blood down her chin.

Suddenly—finding no hint of blame in her voice—Orde saw her instead of himself; realized the blood; and with a look of infinite concern took a clean white handkerchief from his pocket; unfolded it and wiped her lips.

"You fell—you cut yourself?" Already he had half-forgotten her fear; her inarticulate words about Jake, while his mind was busied with the future.

"No," answered Lu slowly, "I didn't fall." Then added with a pathetic touch of her old humour:—"Something just came up agin' me."

"Yet in spite of it all you're alive, and well; anyone can see you are well. And poor little Win—who had every care—gone. It shows—it's true enough that it hurts nobody to rought it a bit. It's what I always said."

With a sudden panic Lu caught at his arm. "It's not that. You don't know: you're not that sort, you couldn't know. But I can't stay. Julian, do you understand I can't stay. I tell you I can't stay! You must take me with you. I'll do anything, anything for you; I'm strong, you see how strong I am. I can work—but you mustn't leave me," and she clung to him passionately. "Julian, Julian! say you'll take me."

"Didn't I say I would take you. I'm on my way to the old humpy now. I only came round to see how you were: all my things have gone on. But you must not make a scene. Of course I'll take you, only I don't know if I am right: if I oughtn't to send you somewhere else."

"Why?"

"Why? Well, because you're a sort of a woman now, Lu. Little Lu! How silly it seems; you grown into a woman, and I"—Orde's tones held the hint of a grievance—" 'pon my soul, I don't feel a day older: and you a woman!"

"I can't not help it," said Lu.

"No, I suppose you can't; and after all there's no Mrs. Grundy among the Ranges. But, for all that, I don't know——" And he hesitated, fully aware that it was not what he did not know of Lu or the world, but what he did know of himself, which constituted the danger.

"You'd be lonely at the hut, there'd be no one to cook or do for you," ventured the girl.

"I know—I was thinking of that; thought of it all the way out. Of course you must come!" Suddenly, with the completed decision, his face cleared. "There's the old rug and the books, and everything there as we left them. Get your duds, and let us away. By the look of you," and once more he glanced her up and down, this time with whimsical good-humour and kindness, "your luggage won't be excessive, eh Miss Green Eyes?"

## CHAPTER XIV

ONCE more the humpy became a home: stores were brought up from town, the place made habitable, and Lu settled down to her old ways of housewifery.

But it was a diminished household, for there was no Win; while Harold had elected to stay on at the farm, showing neither pleasure nor surprise at the fact of Orde's return, still nursing a sullen resentment against everyone connected with his old life, and these two facts alone constituted a difference. But that was not all.

Mackensie had found a good deal to say about Lu's departure: would have found more had not Orde—his determination quickened by opposition—held over him a threat of prosecution for permitted cruelty and neglect, to which the girl's bruised face and cut and swollen lip would have borne ample evidence.

Mrs. Mackensie, also, had plenty to say ; of a no less virulent and even grosser nature ; drawing Orde aside and whispering to him till he broke from her in disgust ; sickened by the woman's talk, by her slovenly person, the utter sordidness of the whole place ; and at the same time strengthened in his impatient desire to take the girl and get away from it all.

Still—during their four days of travelling, first by train, then by coach, and finally with a pack-horse, from the little township in the plains—he was obviously ill at ease, glancing at Lu with an odd curiosity. His mood varying from irresponsible boyish gaiety, to one of brooding silence.

Not that Lu took much notice of this ; it was too much part of his well-remembered character. And, when at last they reached the humpy, she settled down into the old way of life so naturally that, for a while, a weight seemed lifted from Orde's mind ; while his first outbreak of irrational temper appeared to place them once more on their former footing ; that of an exacting, though affectionate master, and loving, obedient child.

But, though the life was outwardly one of peace, gradually the conviction grew upon Lu that it was only outward and comparative. That there was no sureness ; no real sense of security or rest. She had hoped that there might be some return to that one perfect summer they had all spent together ; but once again everything was changed ; and only the setting of life remained the same.

For she was a woman now, in spite of her youth, and her very presence affected Orde with a nervous irritation and excitement ; while between her and happiness hung the old feeling that nothing ever could, or would last.

But with maturity, and a knowledge of the brutal outer world, had come a desperate desire for happiness. It seemed to Lu that there was only one thing worth striving for, now that her life had narrowed down to this single affection—to be happy, to make Julian happy. And with a sort of cunning, which was the one low trait she had brought with her from the farm, the girl set herself to study him and his needs. Beauty, daintily-served meals, comfort, consideration ; the patience and sympathy usually accorded to a child. One by one she offered them according to her means : it was like

a chess player pushing first one pawn, then another, forward upon the board. And the man, at first with surprise and ardour, accepted all that was offered: absorbed it, grew to regard it as a matter of course; and then forgot it was there.

The three long green overalls had been left in one of the boxes beneath the bunk. They only reached a little below Lu's knees now, and there was no material over for sleeves; so that beyond the hem of her coarse shift, her arms rounded with work and brown with the sun, hung bare, while the loose leather belt emphasized the curve of breast and hips. She still wore her hair down, like most bush girls; but she combed and smoothed it till it shone: plaiting it in two thick strands, which hung straight over either ear: was indeed scrupulously neat and orderly, both for her own sake, for the delightful comfort of it, and because Julian loved order.

They started reading again. Lu remembered everything: every word of "The Match"; and, even when she forgot the exact line, the subject and rhythm of every romance and poem that she had heard in the old days; while through all the squalor of farm life, Artemis and Aphrodite, Apollo, Daphne, and all the rest of the Heavenly crew had remained to her. No longer as real people, it is true, but as the symbol of all that is beautiful: the more beautiful because of its apartness from real life.

But Orde had changed. He was forty-five; vicarious loves and hates had lost their charm; and mere melody ceased to attract. He had lived his life to the full; and realizing that he had nothing left to show for it, was greedy for realities: some new emotion or passion that might at last prove to be the real thing. To read about other people's adventures is all very well in youth, when life seems so long. But as the years go on a man has no patience for that sort of thing; he wants to be living all the time. And Orde had reached a period when he was filled with a boundless curiosity to know if there was anything he had, as yet, left untouched.

The summer held late that year—almost to the middle of June the days were hot; the wild animals' fur had scarcely begun to thicken, and to kill time Orde took up his old pastime of bird stuffing. Relinquishing it for the collecting and curing of wings suitable for millinery: cockatoos, rosellas, ibis and magpies; caring less for the actual beauty of the wild



creatures than formerly, and more for the money they might bring him.

Then one day, as Lu was washing clothes at the edge of the creek, she heard Orde calling her—as he breasted the last rise leading from the flats—with all the old enthusiasm in his voice.

“Lu, Lu!” The girl’s heart leapt at the sound, and at the sight of his eager sunburnt face, as he pushed his way through the undergrowth in response to her answering “Coo-ee”; and flung himself on the grass at her side, while she looked up, wiping the thick suds from her arm.

“Well?”

“Lu! Do you know there are Native Companions down on the flat, just under the hill in the old place? You remember where the billabong lies? Well, between that and the clump of stringy bark.”

Lu nodded. Since her return to the humpy she had taken many long walks with Orde, and the mystery of much of the country beyond the forest, with its winding thread of a river, had been solved.

“I thought I saw some of their tracks last time, but I wasn’t sure. However, there they were themselves to-day; a dozen or more of them, drowsing on one leg at the edge of the water. That was where I got the little chap—what was it we called him?”

“The Professor.”

“Ah yes, so it was, the Professor. And he taught you to dance. Do you remember? What an odd little thing you were in those days! I tell you what, Lu,” he went on: then broke off with one of his sudden changes of subject: “Undine—Undine of the soapsuds, that’s what I shall call you;” and he began to hum Henley’s lines:

“Her round arms white with lather,  
Her elbows fresh and red.”

Lu drew herself upright with a jerk. Somehow it made her uncomfortable and half ashamed to hear Orde sing; though it was actually not till years afterwards that she realized it was because he had not the very faintest ear for music.

But he did not notice her movement, and again reverted to his original subject: his white teeth shining in his brown face, his eyes bright with excitement.

"I tell you what, Lu! I have a—what do you call it? A dart! An inspiration! Let's go down to the flat at dawn to-morrow; we can hide in the thick scrub and watch them. In that way you can secure a lesson from the whole *corps de ballet*. And then, Lu! you shall dance to me, if you have not forgotten. But there, you forget nothing. It's exasperating—such a memory and so little for it to feed upon!"

There was a sharp edge of jealousy to Orde's voice, but in another moment he was all eagerness over his plans for the next morning; so that they might be off, and in their place betimes. For the actors must not be disturbed: must not even be conscious of any audience.

No other day would do: it must be next morning or not at all. They must go to bed early, and be up; have tea and get off before three. For the old dread of growing tired of a thing, even of the very thought of it, was—by now—ever present in Orde's mind.

And thus at sunrise the next morning, crouching among the scrub, at the edge of the grey birds' dancing ground, they witnessed the ballet.

He had actually wondered if she would remember! Lu smiled to herself at the thought. For she did not only remember with her mind; it seemed—as she lay there watching—that she remembered with every nerve and muscle, every heart-beat: anticipating every movement that was made: leaping forward with each advance; back with each retreat; bowing, posturing; dropping into sudden stillnesses—every movement anticipated by her thoughts.

At first the flat was flooded with a grey mist, draping the bare white trees in silvery gauze; while, from where they lay, the pool itself, shaded by a dense mass of low-growing scrub, showed a velvety purple, with a silver bloom. And it was against this background that the slender pearl-grey figures moved: stepping high, tip-toeing and posturing; with infinite deliberation and strangely awkward grace. Till the mist was shot with rose pink, then with gold; while the base of the mountains, the dark mass of forest, crept forward into sight; and the grey birds vanished with the shadows.

When, all was over Orde hurried Lu breathlessly up the mountain side, his hand at her elbow; not that they were in

any way pressed for time, but because he always moved and spoke quickly when he was excited.

"It's wonderful! I had forgotten how wonderful it was! So quaint, almost grotesque; yet never ridiculous. Did you count them, Lu? There must have been a hundred or more. The dignity! The assurance! The languishing airs! Why they might be disembodied ghosts of Holland House, the Blessington and D'Orsay: or—of a more superfine world yet—Willouby de Eresby, Gwyndyr, and Lady Clementina. Do you remember Lord Jersey's reply, when somebody remarked:—'No one is perfect.'—'There is one; there is Clementina.'" But I forgot. You have never been in Europe, Lu: you have only breathed air, not atmosphere. What was it Tennyson said?—"Better fifty years of Europe than a cycle of Cathay"? Those birds though! What a picture, and in what a frame. That was near perfection! Can you remember? Can you do it? It was like this and this——"

And, stopping on the steep hillside, Orde began to move his feet and arms, humming a few bars.

"I can't do it. Not here—only on the flat:" protested Lu, as he jerked her forward by the arm. "But I remember. Oh! how I remember;" and her voice broke with excitement, though even then she was calmer than he was; practical enough to realize that she could not dance there on the rough incline; and, reluctantly Orde yielded.

"Not here? Then in the clearing: the moment we get home!"

"No; it 'ull be too hot—I am tired; there will be all the work to do."

"You can rest an hour."

"No." For all her adoration Lu still retained some of her old will and spirit: while occasionally Orde found himself confronted by the same silent independence against which he had before fretted. However, though recognizing it in this case, he knew women well enough to recognize also the shyness which overcame Lu at the very thought of dancing in the blazing sunshine; together with the fact that no artistic result could be expected from the inopportune moment; and refrained from further appeal.

However, directly supper was over that night, he began again.

"Now it's almost dark! Now, you Lover of Shades! Now, you Changeling! you Will o' the Wisp! Dance, now dance!"

"I've things to do; I'm tired!" With sudden shyness Lu pressed back against the lintel of the door.

"Dance I tell you——" Orde shook himself with impatience, as he would have liked to shake Lu: "it's all nonsense: you said you'd dance, and you must!"

"My feet ache; my shoes are too heavy."

"Take them off. Of course you can't dance in those things. Take them off, and your stockings too. Now dance—dance!" he repeated, pointing.

And half mechanically, driven forward, partly by her old obedience to Orde's wishes, her desire to please him; partly by the memory of the grey birds' movements, which was Swimming through her mind, stimulating every nerve and muscle, Lu stooped; drew off her shoes and stepped into the open. Hesitated for a moment, and stood awkwardly rubbing one bare foot over the other in the old childish fashion.

It was difficult to start in cold blood like that, with no partner to lead her. But with a sudden inspiration she closed her eyes: visualized the grey birds, felt the memory of them run warmly through her veins, opened her eyes again, and commenced to sway. Then, springing forward, in sudden response to Orde's reiterated command, poised in the first position, and began.

At first, Orde, leaning smoking against the lintel of the door, laughed and applauded; even directed her movements. But after a moment or so he fell silent; absorbed, first in the dance, then in the dancer, who moved more and more rapidly, the flimsy green smock swirling higher above her knees as her steps quickened. Till, gradually, all appreciation of the grace of the girl's movements—the winglike gesture of her hands and arms, the slender, swaying neck beneath the loosened mass of hair; the picture as a whole, set gemlike in the open space among the dark trees—was lost; and with it the attitude of the critic, the connoisseur. Nothing remained for him, save the curve of white legs and rounded knees.

A dull feeling of resentment rose up in his heart. It was the same old thing. It was not his fault; it was nobody's fault. He did not want to feel like that, to this girl of all



girls, who was in a way his charge. He had known from the beginning that it would not do.

At first Lu—testing her memory to the full, picking up thread after thread—was absorbed in her dance. But gradually she realized that the applause had ceased; that her enthusiasm was thrown back upon herself, as if from a dead wall: caught Orde's frowning glance and stopped dead: glanced at her feet, and pulled down her gown stiff and straight beneath the leather belt, with a sudden flame of self-consciousness.

"You don't not care for it—I—I must have grown stiff with carrying milk-pails and suchlike——" Her voice broke piteously.

"It's well enough. But you'd better put on your shoes and stockings; you'll get cold." Orde's voice was icy.

"Yes." Lu shivered; a moment ago she had been hot, but a sudden chill seemed to pass over her as he spoke. "I guess I'll go to bed." She moved a little towards him as if to bid him good-night; then stood still again, feeling awkward and ill at ease. "I'm tired—I guess I'll go to bed:" she repeated stupidly: but truly enough; for she was tired, terribly tired.

It was as if she had played her last pawn, made her last offering to her god—and lost.

"Very well, good-night."

As she turned to go Orde pushed open the door of the humpy and put one foot on the step, then flung back over his shoulder: "You're not cold out there, or frightened—or anything?"

"Not I!" answered the girl valiantly, but her heart was a little warmed at the question. It was nice of him to think of her like that. Never for one moment did it enter her head—or indeed his—that they should change: that the cosy bunk in the hut should be given up to her, while he took her place in the hollow tree.

But for all the comfort of his surroundings Orde could not sleep. The hut seemed intolerably hot, and rising, he set the door wide open. It was not natural for the time of year; they would pay for this with a thunderstorm.

Was it true what Mrs. Mackensie had said. He had not believed a word of it at the time, not even given it a second thought. But it might be true; the girl had no business to dance like that with her skirts above her knees. She ought to

know better. Perhaps she did know, perhaps it had been true after all; and if so it would make a difference—all the difference; however little the fault might have been hers in the beginning.

## CHAPTER XV

DURING the next few days Julian went about his work almost in silence; scarcely speaking to Lu and avoiding her as much as possible; while the girl tortured herself to know where the fault lay. There was no mention of dancing, no more reading, no more walks: it seemed as if everything had come to an end; or rather as if the whole world was waiting, hushed, for some new and sudden development; while the unusually warm weather still held; heavy and breathless.

Then one evening, four days after they had watched the grey birds together, there was an ominous mutter of thunder; the darkness had thickened so that at four o'clock it was impossible to see any longer without artificial light; and Orde, who had been setting opossum snares on one of the slopes over the ridge, was driven home; reluctantly enough, for now his only peace of mind seemed to be found away from the hut, and out in the open.

Lu was standing at the door watching for him, with her green skirts blown about her ankles by the wind, which had suddenly arisen in quick sobbing bursts. But she went inside directly she caught sight of Orde. For in these days it needed a good deal of courage to meet his sullen glance; while to stand and wait for his coming, with a forced, unanswered smile upon her face, was more than she could bear.

"Is everything fastened up safely outside," he asked as he entered and hung his hat behind the door: "we're going to have a bad storm—thank goodness! Thank goodness for anything that will break this——" For a moment he hesitated, then veered. "Light the lamp and get the tea now: I want to stuff that cock ibis afterwards, and shall need all the table and all my attention."

Lu knew what he meant. It was a decree of banishment; and directly tea was over she cleared the table; then timidly placed everything that she thought he might need close at

hand. She was always timid with him now. She could not move or speak, could not express a wish or thought without being hampered by the fear that it might offend: hanging on Orde's every expression, parroting his every idea; though never, for a moment, did she believe that he could or would show her any unkindness, her whole fear being that she might fail him, or fall in his estimation.

For the most part she had remained undisturbed by all the brutalities at the farm, apart from that one fear in connection with big Jake. But even there the fear had been less subtle, for the anxiety of hatred is nothing in comparison with that of love: more particularly the blind groping of a first love.

On their return to the humpy Orde had given the girl a new grey blanket, out of which she had cut herself a primitive cloak; and wrapping this about her, she sat down on a log outside the door of her sleeping place, and watched the gathering storm; the heavy masses of cloud, leaden-tinted overhead, and showing a curious greenish tint above the triangular patch of open country. Then, as the rain began to fall, in large scattered drops she pulled the cloak a little closer without attempting to move: sitting with her elbows on her knees, her chin cupped in her hands, thinking of Orde, and of his changed manner towards her.

He had been kind enough up to that evening of the dance, for his ordinary moodiness was so much a part of his general character that Lu had almost ceased to regard it. But this was different. He might have been disappointed with her dancing; but something within herself told the girl that she had done well: in any case a grievance so little affecting him, personally, would not have lasted.

During these four days Lu had suffered in a sort of blank bewilderment; but something in the breaking of the storm seemed to be clearing her brain; and for the first time she stood sufficiently far from her hurt to realize that it was not her fault. Then she began to think of the other men whom she had known. Mackensie and big Jake: the three or four other cockies: the milking hands: the drummer with his illustrated Bibles; the dead-beats and swaggies, the solitary fossicker who she had talked with down by the dam. They all had their moods; but with the cockies it had always been a question of bad times, or a cow that had "died upon them";

while the milking hands suffered either from too much drink, or the desire for more. Men and their grievances were, for the most part, easy enough to understand.

Then there had been the larking, the rough familiarities that stood for courtship; but that had been simple enough too. For over two years Lu had lived among animals, and people who were little, if any, higher. They were all the same: all discussed with equal freedom.

But Julian—Julian was different. It was impossible to gauge his moods by the two passions of hunger and greed which governed those others. She remembered the expression which she used to see on Jake's face. She remembered Mackensie's eyes one day when he had told her to pull down her gown and show him where a heifer had butted her on the breast, and the laugh with which he had thrust his hand into her dress—"To feel where the bruise is." Mackensie who went to chapel every Sunday; and cursed her steadily throughout the week! Orde could not be compared with these. In her own mind Lu classed him as a gentleman; something that was above all wrong: not the same sort as the drummer, who wore a frock-coat and grey squash hat, though he was unmistakably a "cronk."

A shaft of light cut across the clearing, as Orde opened the hut door; peered out, and called her.

"Lu—Lu!"

"Yes." The girl moved forward obediently, till putting out his hand in the darkness, Orde touched her wet cloak.

"Have you been sitting out of doors? Have you no sense? Give that to me—I'll hang it in front of the fire; and then go to bed."

"It's not really wet."

"Give it to me;" and Orde caught at the cloak in a fury of impatience, as the girl fumbled with the clumsy fastening; while at the same moment there was a heavy peal of thunder; followed by a flame of lightning, so bright that the white trunks of the trees seemed, on a sudden, to spring forward out of the darkness, like an onrushing army of naked figures.

"No, no! go back. I'll come for it," shouted Orde, dropping the cloak as—with the effect of an opened sluice—the rain teemed down in a solid sheet. "You'll get soaked! Go back, go back, I tell you!" he repeated angrily, as he moved



inside the door and put his shoulder to shut it, the room behind a whirl of paper and grey ashes; then hesitated and half turned. "No—wait; you'd better come inside." The words were uttered grudgingly; and the moment they were uttered, without even a glance to see if the invitation was accepted, Orde moved towards the hearth and began to settle the giant logs that lay upon it.

For a moment Lu grappled with the door, the wind driving her back, whipping her skirts tight around her ankles. Then, having mastered it, she hung her cloak behind the door, and gathered together the scattered papers; while Orde, with his back to the fire, stood watching her.

"Shall I get some coffee? The water 'ud boil in a minute."

"Very well;" answered the man shortly. Then as the preparations were completed, and the girl moved towards the fire; standing like a docile child before him, till he should move, so that she might reach the kettle, he caught her by the shoulder.

"Lu, is it true what that woman at the farm said to me?"

"What?" Lu's eyes were wide, her mouth a little open, as she faced him with a puzzled stare.

"About that man: that—cowman? That she saw him—that he was in your room one night?"

"Yes." The colour eddied in a crimson flood over the girl's face and neck; but her eyes did not waver. She was glad that he knew: he would understand better all that she had suffered at the farm, be sorry for her. But to her amazement Orde pushed her roughly on one side.

"The swine! Get the coffee now and be quick, you must be off;" he said curtly.

But there was a new expression in his eyes as they followed her about the room. And suddenly, with a sense of horror, Lu realized it as the same as Jake, as all the other men, had worn. That after all there was nothing left her to hold to. That even Orde was as those others had been.

There was indeed no difference. Save this—and in a moment the resolve was made—Julian must not be allowed to be unhappy: Julian who had done everything for her. And in spite of her sickening fear—of the fact that the blood was pumping through her veins, so furiously as to sound like

thunder in her ears—Lu determined that no demand this one man made upon her should ever be in vain.

It seemed as if the breaking of the storm had loosened Orde's tongue; for putting his cup on the mantelshelf, he walked to and fro and talked: going back to his old tales of pagan days; the gods and goddesses of whom he loved to tell her. But on this night there was a personal trend in all he said, while he spoke half aggressively, almost as if defending himself.

" 'Wanton imaginings of the evil one,' I remember the old parson at home calling them. Evil, evil! There is nothing beautiful that is not evil, according to their creed. According to mine there is no good but beauty and nature. And there is more beauty in one white gum-stem—and the smooth woman-like skin of it—springing skywards, than in any pillar of the Christian faith. Don't believe anything anyone tells you about goodness and ugliness, girl; they are as far apart as the earth and sky. But you must go:" he stopped suddenly, astride in front of the fire, and stared at her with frowning brows.

"I don't want to go:" Lu stood with one hand on the table to support herself, for she was shaking from head to foot: while a clammy coldness crept over her, and it seemed as if her heart had ceased to beat. But she spoke bravely, with a half laugh, her chin high, her cheeks flaming.

For a moment Orde fixed her in astonishment: then burst into a sudden, loud laugh.

"You don't want to go—then by the gods you shall stay!" And he drew her to him, then pushed her gently back into his own big chair.

"There you are, Lu! you look adorable there in your green frock. Lu"—and he dropped to his knees at her side, his face aglow with an odd, boyish eagerness: "have I been a brute to you? Poor Lu, dear Lu"—and taking her hands in his he pressed them to either side of his face:—"It was your own fault though; you should not be so pretty. Do you know that you danced my heart away that night? You with your little white feet. Take off your shoes and stockings now, I want to feel them here in the hollow of my hand. No, I'll do it. What silly—silly knots—you ought to have buckles—'silver buckles to your shoon.' Now—here is more beauty than any abstract perfection beyond the skies, the arch and

the curve and the blue veins of your little foot, and the triangle of white that the sun has left behind your ear—those are what I love ; and the curve of your breast, and those wicked green eyes. Kiss me—again—again Lu ; you're trembling. You're not frightened ?”

“ No,” said Lu, “ I don't—don't not mind.”

So the last offering was made: the queen pushed forward upon the chess-board of life—and lost.

## CHAPTER XVI

ORDE had once boasted that he made a fine art of love. This was true: everything he did was accomplished, not only with finish, but with a picturesque flourish. An ordinary vulgar intrigue held no attraction for him. There must be a symbol, a fancy: that charm of “ the different,” of which he acknowledged himself as being for ever in search.

Therefore, from the day when Lu offered herself, as the last offering to that demon of boredom which threatened him, Orde's attitude towards her became for the while crystallized into an extravagant adoration. She was the incarnation of the primitive, the Venus of the forest ; the quintessence of a passion, no less pure for having, as he imagined, flickered into being before his coming. It was all a fulfilment of self, a sacrament of love. Something wonderful and apart: different from all that had gone before. Even, as Orde half began to believe—inspired afresh each day by the girl's passionate adoration—capable of lasting to the end of his life ; of proving itself taht “ real thing ” for which, to do him justice, he had always hoped.

As a matter of fact, it lasted close on six months. Re-kindled by Lu, in a coat and cap of opossum-fur—which Orde brought her from town—laughing down at him from among the snow-laden fir-boughs, where she had climbed to set a snare ; or striding by his side, her gun across her shoulder, her fine skin whipped to a glow by the cold wind : Lu before the wood fire in soft white silk, bartered for skins with a Chinese pedlar, which he had shown her how to fashion into a sleeveless garment, purely reminiscent of the Greece he loved.

And Lu herself, though a little puzzled by it all, yet flourished, gaining in beauty, in poise and self-confidence; in all the fascination which a woman achieves when she has once realized her power.

Through the entire winter the charm held undiminished; though it is characteristic of the girl that never, for one moment, did she feel secure or cease to be on the alert for any fresh means of holding Orde's attention.

However, as the sun rose higher in the heavens her happiness lessened. She dreaded the spring. And perhaps, in some measure, the fear diminished her freshness and vitality, weakened her hold on the man. But, whatever the cause might be, it was palpable that, as the snow vanished, he grew restless.

To Orde himself this recurrence of all his old symptoms appeared inevitable, though the knowledge brought a sense of chill: for after all it had not been the "real thing." During some weeks he had suspected this; but with the first spring days it became a recognized fact.

But still there was this one new point: for the first time in his life, Julian Orde realized the fact that, for him, at any rate, there was no real thing. That if any passion could have lasted it would have been this one. That love, judging it by the standard of stability, would for ever, so far as he was concerned, be as it had always been; merely the affair of a season, an unsatisfied desire, a passing fancy; though in this case there was a certain sense of responsibility.

"When we go down to Melbourne:" he began saying. Then—"when we are in Melbourne." The plural comforting Lu a little, though by no means reassuring her.

Then one warm spring evening—as she sat on the log before the door, busied over the fashioning of a white gown for the summer, which she half feared might never come—Orde, walking up and down and smoking, broke out into one of those defiant tirades which, with him, always prestiged some change; or at least showed the present state of affairs as being no longer endurable.

"You don't know what it is! Here summer is upon us with all its blatant glare. But in London the lamps are being lighted earlier each day. It is the time of mists—of pastel-like beauty; of infinite charm. Lu! you can't even imagine it. I must take you to London—you will lie against the heart



of the world there. To think that you've never smelt London mud; never heard the traffic roar up Ludgate Hill; never seen the blinking line of lights snap their eyes along the Embankment, fling beckoning hands across the bridges."

"There's the Southern Cross and the moon rainbow; I've seen 'em scores upon scores of times:" said Lu wistfully. "Do you remember——"

"But they're the works of God, girl!" interrupted Orde, with a roughness she had not experienced for months:—"the blank, inhuman, far-away works of God. When one's happy they're enough. But a man has moods when he's savage—yes savage, for the filthy, groping ways of men. When he'd rather a restaurant in Soho, the smell of garlic, and the company of other half-damned men, than the entire host of heaven. An *omelette aux fines herbes* than all the fruits of Paradise on a paten of fine gold. And a painted woman on his knee, whom he knows to be no better than himself, than every sainted housewife in Christendom. Man is all beast; save for some one fibre; some imperceptible nerve, some wavering, thin white thread of consciousness, which he calls a soul; and denies all the beasts by virtue of possessing a language in which to bray his denial."

"You are not happy? You said you loved the forest. Julian, the sweet briar is out; I saw some to-day."

"Happy! Happy dead, because the shroud has lain in lavender." The words sounded well. Orde remembered the time when men had hung on such words. In Paris, sprawling over marble-topped tables, breathing out an incense of flattery and cigarette smoke.

In Spanish posadas. Round the miners' camp-fire. Or hanging over a sea of uplifted faces round the plinth of Nelson's column. A different affair altogether, this: listeners of another calibre: men so in earnest themselves that they did not realize how the intoxication of mere words could sweep the speaker off his feet; so that he half forgot his own eloquence in the recital of their wrongs.

"Men like badness—" said Lu sagely. "After all, what is it either way?"

Orde, at a standstill against the lintel of the door, drew a deep breath of smoke, and glanced down at her curiously. Again and again he has found reason to doubt the truth of

Mrs. Mackensie's tale ; but he had never ceased to wonder ; and the girl's words arrested his attention.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, what's right or wrong anyway? Half the goodness in the world's because folks don't want to do things, and make laws to best them that do. It's the weakest with the most wits against the strongest with the most feelings. Seems to me there's no wrong except being afraid ; or not caring enough to know that you're alive."

Orde stared. He had propounded this very doctrine to the girl again and again ; even in the old days, when she was a mere child. Not because he wished for a convert to his beliefs, but because he found it necessary to clarify them by words : in much the same way as a dunce needs paper and pencil for the working out of the simplest sum. But in spite of this he did not for a moment realize that her words were a mere parroting of his own idea ; mingled with a desperate attempt not to appear behindhand, or ignorant, of the ways of the great world which he loved.

"You make a personal affair of it : like all women you bring everything back to the question of sex."

"There ain't anything else for a woman. I learnt that much at the farm. When they talk of a man being straight, they mean not telling lies, or being a cronk, or goin' back on a mate. With a girl it means just one thing ; that she won't give a mite of herself till she's sure of a good bargain—a roof over her head and her keep for life. I've no use for that sort."

Orde gave a loud, and rather brutal, laugh.

"A veritable Portia ! and what's more a Portia who practises what she preaches. I suppose all this accounts for that little affair with the cowman."

"Oh, Jake ! My troubles !" said Lu, and shrugged her shoulders, stimulated by the interest she had provoked ; though her cheeks flamed with a vague sense of discomfort.

"Though, 'pon my soul, you might have chosen something better than that, if you wished to show your defiance of the moral code."

"I didn't choose."

"Well, at any rate you were complacent : " sneered Orde.

For a moment the girl hesitated, peering at him through the

gathering twilight: puzzled alike by his manner and by the word which he had used.

"What do you mean?"

"Well you know what I mean!"

"You think——" Since the last mention of Jake's name some four months earlier Lu had been learning to apply her knowledge; and rising now, she stared into Orde's face, her own white to the lips. "You think—you believe that beast—that it was like it is with you?"

"Not exactly, I know you care for me. But, well damn it all! that woman told me—you yourself gave me to understand it was true. Was it true? Lu, was it true? You've got to tell me now, was it true?" And, scarcely knowing whether he meant to shake or caress the girl, Orde moved nearer and flung out his hand towards her.

But with a gesture of repulsion Lu pressed back against the wall:—"Don't! Don't touch me. It makes me sick to think of—is that all your world has taught you?—That low beast of a man!—and our love! I'd have killed myself first. That you—you——" With a sob she threw her arm up across her face, in the uncouth gesture of a boy ashamed of his grief. Then flung round upon him again. "What did you take me for? Why did you pretend to love me if that's what you thought? What did all your fine talk mean? You were right, you're all beasts—all alike. How could you even kiss me if that's what you thought. Didn't you know how I loved you! Julian"—suddenly her voice broke, and the piteous tears streamed openly down her face:—"does it mean that there is no real love—that that's all there is in it? Just like the animals—that nothing matters."

"Child! Of course, of course, it's all different; of course I love you—more than I've ever loved before, dear little girl. I'm more sorry than words can say. I didn't mean to hurt you. I didn't think any less of you for it."

"I know; an' somehow, though I don't rightly know why, that makes it seem worse—that you didn't not mind."

"After all it wasn't my fault."

"No." Lu fixed him with an odd coldness; for a moment it seemed as if she saw him as he really was: then the obvious distress in his face softened her. "Never mind, it doesn't matter—not much:" she added vaguely, and turned her gaze

toward the open, staring out before her with blank, unseeing eyes; conscious only of an utter weariness.

"Lu—I can never tell you how I regret it, how sorry I am." Orde's hand was upon the girl's arm. It was true that he was sorry, for many reasons, and in many ways, for he hated being made to feel a brute, as much as he resented the sudden sense of responsibility which seemed to have been thrust upon him. Thus, as the girl turned towards him, she saw that his eyes were full of tears; while his expression was so childish in its sorrow that, in a moment, she relented, ready with any excuse for him.

"It wasn't your fault. You've no cause to be sorry. It was *she* as said it. Jule, don't mind dear, don't take on," and she laid her hand against his face in the caress one might offer to a sorrowing child; "after all, if it hadn't been for that you would—you'd have gone on being miserable!"

"You know, I'd have done anything rather than injure you:" asserted Orde eagerly, with a sublime belief in his own words.

"Then I'm glad. After all it's true, what you say that there is no badness—nothing that's all badness. If you had not thought that of me, then we should never have been happy. You'd never have loved me like you do. And now you belong to me, and I to you for always. Don't be sorry. I love you. Julian, how I love you!" and pressing closer she raised her lips to his. "I'm not sorry; I'll never be sorry. I'm glad—for everything in life, for every bit of everything."

## CHAPTER XVII

FOR a few weeks there was a return to happiness at the humpy; while Orde went about his work with a sort of chastened seriousness, and was unfailingly kind and gentle to Lu.

For once it seemed that he was really sobered by his sense of responsibility. But in the end even this acted adversely: for he was so convinced that he could never play her false; so inspired by a pleasant glow of virtue, by the belief that this bond was inevitable and permanent that, after a while, it actually brought him a certain sense of security, a feeling



that a little comparative freedom might be indulged in, without fear.

Thus, early in September, the humpy was dismantled, and the two journeyed to Bright, where Orde disposed of his horse, and certain necessities were purchased; from whence, after a stay of two days, they moved on to Melbourne, the man's complacency held meanwhile by the girl's delight and surprise at all she saw ; her shrewd remarks, her fresh attitude towards civilization.

But once the city was reached everything seemed different. The pleasure caused by Lu's *naïveté* was lost in irritation at her ignorance. Besides, in city clothes and a hat she was a different creature from the Diana of the woodland days. Life became petty and sordid. The old woman with whom Orde found her lodgings was suspicious; for believing in the sanctity of the tie that bound them, he did not think it necessary to uphold Lu's position by passing her off as his legal wife.

What was the good of lying ? He knew and she knew ; surely that was enough.

Two whole months passed. Lu lost all her courage and spring. She was pining desperately for the heights, sickened by the very feel of the pavement beneath her feet ; drawing more and more in upon herself as the possibility of a new complication in life dawned upon her ; silent on this as upon many other subjects ; partly from pride, and partly from her realization of the way in which even the hint of any fresh responsibility irritated Orde : who, if the truth were told, was at this time battling fiercely against his own conscience.

Every day as it seemed, people were coming from, or going to, Europe. Not only did Julian Orde gather together many old acquaintances ; but it was always—" do you remember " this or that person, event or place ; till it seemed as if a thousand threads conspired to draw him in the wake of the departing ships, to that land which—when he was away from it—appeared so delectable.

Then, as a final argument for his departure, came the news that the following season would see a still greater boom in opossum furs ; that it was to be all silver opossum or ring-tails, and that the skins were to be dressed by a new method, ensuring the utmost pliability. It was imperative that the

home buyers should be personally interviewed and bargains struck: there might be opportunities for an extended industry; for the employment of many men. And, after all, it would only entail an absence of six months at most.

At Lu's request Orde installed her in a furnished room of her own; in a large building, free from landladies; with a little stove where she could prepare her own meals. Put twenty pounds in the savings bank and gave her the book. She could eke it out by work of some sort; it would keep her from fretting. He was not quite sure what work, but there were so many women earning their own living that it must be easy. He had thought of the stage, but relinquished the idea. It was hard for girls to keep straight on the stage—and Lu must try and keep straight. He had noticed that men stared at her a good deal, and was vaguely comforted by the recurrence of his old doubts. Then, how easily she had given herself to him!

Lu felt that very little was expected of her; and the knowledge wounded her to the very soul. But the roar of the city seemed to have rendered her inarticulate. The houses with their staring eyes daunted her. Besides at that time all her feelings were in a way numbed; and she half wished that Orde would be quick and get gone. She was like a man waiting for death, anything to have the last agony over.

Even when the final parting came she did not seem capable of feeling it; though Orde, after a period of wild boyish excitement, was in a state of sentimental regret; making her don the one remaining green gown, that he might carry with him a picture of her as she was in the old days.

Standing on the landing outside the room which now, quite unsoftened by humanity, represented her only home, Lu listened to his footsteps clatter down the stone stairs; till distance devoured the last echo.

That was her lover; Julian Orde, the wanderer; the hunter. The one human element in her life. The only person who had ever realized her as an individual. He was going away. Soon an infinite distance would lie between them. She thought of screaming to him to stop: of running after him: even following him to the port and boarding the ship. But curiously enough she did not want to: she did not want to do anything. She was not even crying, and the thought brought with it some measure of self-reproach.

She perfectly realized the marble pattern of the wall-paper on the staircase; the greasy curved lines where the charwoman's scrubbing-brush had passed along the corridor, the flare of gas in the dirty globe. But, though she repeated it again and again to herself, she could not realize that Orde was really gone.

For a while she leant against the wall, wondering what she should do next, her back a little bent at the waist. There was no longer any need for her to keep upright, or make the best of herself. Yes, that was the root of the whole matter. It would be of no consequence what she looked like, or where she went, or what she did, for at least six months. If she went out and did not return nobody would be any the wiser. For the first time the girl realized, in its fulness, that woman's Gehenna of having no one to need her; having no one to watch for her going out or coming in.

To be no longer missed; to be no longer depended upon, even for the commonest needs of daily life. To one of Lu's nature that was far worse than the absence of any luxuries, or caresses, or even of love itself.

## CHAPTER XVIII

WITH the rather grim courage with which Nature had gifted her—for her laughter and gaiety were all on the surface, while she possessed none of the inconsequent hopefulness of youth—Lu set herself to face life alone.

She would not touch the money Orde had left. It might be needed by another, the thought of whom occupied her incessantly; for by now her approaching motherhood had become a certainty. She could work and would work. She had two pounds in gold and a few shillings; that must last her till she found something to do.

It was no question of hoping; it simply must be. Her determination was such that it felt to her like a tangible thing, a blade of steel, capable of cutting through any obstacle.

By this time it was nearing the end of November, and the city swam in heat; the asphalt bubbling and seething beneath her feet, the pavement burning through her boots.

It was a bad season. The north wind blew almost unceas-

ingly ; filling the air with clouds of yellow dust, scraps of straw and paper and other débris ; and eddying fiercely round the corners of the streets, everyone of which seemed alike to the country girl ; save for the fact that some had shops and others had not.

Orde had told her to take in a paper and answer any advertisement which seemed likely to suit her. This she did, answering all of which the meaning was in the least clear. If she saw one for a housemaid who could wash, she applied for the place, because she understood washing, though she did not even know what a housemaid was. Cooks, laundry-maids, nursemaids. Somehow or other she found her way to the different houses which offered employment. Tramping miles ; facing the glaring yellow drives : the arrogant tidiness of flower-beds and lawns and white steps ; the scornful maids, in caps and aprons ; who opened the varnished doors with the polished knockers and stared her up and down.

She answered an advertisement for a platelayer because she thought it must have something to do with food : for a *chef*, because she had heard Orde say that a *chef* was a cook ; for a compositor simply because she did not know what it meant, and it might mean something that she could do.

She walked up the hill, and through the endless intricacies of East Melbourne ; explored the wilds of Carlton ; and followed the tram-lines through the dust and glare to St. Kilda ; all in response to beckoning advertisements. The only ones she did not answer were those for generals ; remembering what Orde had told her of Napoleon and Wellington, and wondering vaguely what the Australian army must be like to need so many.

In the whole of the city there were but two oases for her ; the South Melbourne Docks where the passenger ships came and went ; and the Fitzroy Gardens where the grotesque statuary reminded her of Orde's tales of gods and goddesses. There was even a Diana with bow and quiver which she gazed at piteously, wondering if it were possible that she should ever have been likened to such a clean-limbed piece of indifference. For by now, Lu's feet were swollen with the unaccustomed pavements and pressure of clumsily-made boots ; while her figure was already growing uncouth in the grey gingham gown, which had looked so fresh and Quakerish when



Orde bought it for her ; out of a shop-window on their very first day in town.

Then she found out, from the woman who scrubbed the corridors, what a "general" meant ; and answered yet more advertisements ; to be met with a cold stare of appraisal ; and the information that only respectable girls need apply.

"We don't want none of your gay sort here:" said one. And Lu wondered at the word.

At last, however, when the two pounds were gone, and there were only a few pence remaining out of the silver, her chance came.

She had walked out to Abbotsford, lured by an advertisement for a starch-making hand ; and half-way back to her rooms had grown so faint that she stopped at a little tea-shop on the Eastern Hill for a cup of tea.

The place—but just opened, for the advertisement had said between seven and eight in the morning—was cool and dim ; and thankful to be out of the glare Lu lingered over her tea and bread and butter ; deciding that, as it was the only meal she would allow herself that day, she might as well take her time.

An untidy girl—the back of her dirty white blouse open, showing a strip of pink flannelette bodice, and grimy stay-laces—was washing the floor ; an operation she performed by slopping the water out of the bucket in pools, swishing it round with a rag as far as it would go ; and then starting again in a fresh place ; not even attempting to move any of the tables or chairs ; so that the water ran round them or under them, or lay in pools in the hollows of the uneven floor.

The proprietress, a stout, fair woman with a high colour came in and asked what she had done with the scrubbing-brush, and why she did not dry the floor as she washed it ; at which the girl merely shrugged her shoulders.

"Do you hear what I say ?" the proprietress's voice rose.

"I hear right enough ; seeing that you ain't exactly whispering."

"Then why don't you do your work properly ?"

"'Cause I'm tired of it, that's why," and scrambling to her feet—with her heel catching the lace of her petticoat—the girl gave the pail a kick, which sent the water slopping over its edge. "I'm sick of you an' your slanging. Jaw, jaw,

jaw—you want to take a reef in your lip, that's what you want! You want a heathen black slave, or a Chinkie, you do, not a white lady. Who are you, tell me that? Who are you, that's what I want to know?"

"I'm your mistress and you'll do what I tell you, and start and wash every bit of that floor all over again, or you'll go; that's the end of it."

"Well I'll go; an' quick enough too when I get my wages."

Trembling with passion the woman unlocked a drawer; took out some silver, counted it and pushed it across the table to the girl. "There you are, now get out of this! A filthy slut, I don't know how I've ever put up with you as long as I have done."

"Slut! I like that. Have you ever seen y'self in the morning. Lord! I wouldn't touch you with the end of a punt-pole." And the girl flung into the pantry; to reappear a moment or two later in a long white alpaca dust-coat; a beflowered hat on the top of her curling-pins, and many rows of pearls hiding the sundry deficiencies of her neckwear. "Slut is it—you indeed! You as ain't got no lace on yer drawers!" And with this parting shot she took her money, and flung out, slamming the door behind her.

The proprietress in her clean white linen dress looked at the sloppy floor and bucket; and then, gathering her skirts together, with a grimace, was stretching out her hand towards the cloth, from which rivulets of dirty water oozed slowly over the floor, when she felt a touch on her shoulder.

"You let that be, an' show me where I can hang my hat:" said Lu. There was no diffidence in her voice, this was her chance and she knew it.

It was a dirty job. The corners and dark places under the counter were beyond words. The cast-iron legs of the tables had hollow claw-like feet, each a mine of dead flies and crumbs. Lu fetched bucket after bucket of clean water; and revelled in an orgy of soapsuds; finding it inexpressibly good to be at work again: sanding the marble tops, polishing every morsel of brass; finally—as customers began to drop in for morning tea—retiring to the pantry and grappling with an apparently endless accumulation of stained cups and saucers, and greasy plates.

"I was right;" said the proprietress, peering in: "she was

a slut. Saturday half-holiday and not a single one of the luncheon things washed up. But I was a fool to lose my temper. I might have been landed with nobody; and then I'd have looked clever." And she passed on to the kitchen; while a couple of waitresses came into the pantry to hang their hats and coats behind the door, and stare at the new girl.

It was an astounding day. For a couple of hours Lu's brain reeled as she stood washing dishes: "Chops two, one underdone—one grilled steak—one chop—one scrambled egg—one boiled egg, soft: one black coffee—two chops well done—one steak, underdone." The ceaseless torrent of orders swept past her, till she felt submerged beneath them: scarcely able to draw breath, though they were none of her business.

But at two it was all over. There was very little done with afternoon tea, and the proprietress—Miss Mack—saw to that herself. The waitresses, "young ladies" as they were called, took off their jaunty caps and aprons and, with their mouths full of pins, fixed their hair at the four-inch piece of looking-glass behind the pantry door, then departed; wishing Lu a friendly good-bye; with no sign of that arrogance displayed by the servants who lurked behind varnished doors and brass knockers.

Half an hour later, as Lu was drying the last plate, Miss Mack put her head in at the door.

"Eight till two-thirty—or three; anyhow till you've finished the luncheon dishes; and ten bob a week and your dinner."

"I haven't got a character," replied Lu, determined to forestall the inevitable inquiry.

Miss Mack laughed, for she was a cheerful soul and easy going. So easy going that a point where she lost her temper, beyond recall, was—after weeks of slackness—the inevitable end of all her business relationships.

"Anyone can see that with half an eye," she said: "but you're clean, an' that's all we want here. I've put you some cold meat and salad on a table inside. And remember eight sharp!"

Emboldened by being once more enlisted in the legion of workers, Lu made friends with the charwoman who scrubbed the passages; and through her got evening work, cleaning offices after the occupants were gone. Anxious to save, so that she might have some pretty clothes by the time Orde

came home—for she was learning the importance of such aids to affection from the tea-room girls—she might have starved herself; had not Mrs. Platt, the charwoman, told her it would be bad for the child.

“It won’t be nothing to look at; an’ always grizzlin’, if you don’t eat plenty; an’ with all the work you’ve got to do too!” she declared. Upon which Lu, with her usual thoroughness, set herself to get the greatest possible food value from the least possible expenditure. For it was unendurable to think of Julian’s child being “nothing to look at” and “grizzling.” Julian who loved life and beauty!

There were lots of other things Mrs. Platt told her. To get out in the public gardens in the intervals of work; and to look at the blue sky, unless she wanted her baby’s eyes to be the colour of paving-stones.

This idea planted a further seed of suggestion in Lu’s mind. So that, passionately desiring a little girl with blue eyes—curiously enough the thought of a son had not even entered her head—and remembering Jacob and the peeled rods, she bought half a yard of blue art-muslin, and tied it in a large bow at the foot of her bed.

It was also Mrs. Platt who showed her how to fashion sundry small garments, mostly of flannelette. “Though you won’t want them much at first,” she said, “they’ll lend you all that at the hospital.”

Lu stared. “But what should I go in the hospital for?” she inquired. “It’s the place where folks go when they’re ill, ain’t it?”

“Oh, you’ll be ill: never you fear; you’ll be ill right enough!” asserted Mrs. Platt, with some relish. “Women don’t get nothing without paying for it in this world; let’s hope as how in the next it ’ull be different, an’ the men ’ull get their turn. Though if there ain’t any marrying, nor giving in marriage, there won’t be much for neither party to put up with.”

It was Mrs. Platt—vast breasted, wide hipped; with shining, anxious face, and minute wisp of hair, adequately subdued by a single hairpin, every seam of whose black gown was black and shiny, and incredibly taut—who insisted that Lu should see a doctor; for the sake of getting a recommendation for the hospital, if for nothing else.

There was a lady doctor in Collins Street who she knew:



and there the two pilgrimaged in state one afternoon, during the hours between the tea-room and the office cleaning : the charwoman wearing a beaded bonnet, with many intervals of denuded brown cotton between the beads, and a box-cloth jacket, very much strapped and incapable of meeting anywhere ; while Lu was dressed in the grey print, which she had washed and ironed before starting, and which—in spite of the heat—still felt uncomfortably dank.

It was a momentous day because it gained Lu a friend—adding yet another devotee to the grey-haired woman, on whom so many of her own sex laid the secret of burdens which had grown past their own bearing.

Lu always remembered the coolness of it all : the softly-shaded green room, which reminded her of the forest. The touch of the doctor's slender fingers ; the gentle matter-of-fact way in which she listened to all the girl told her ; prompting with an occasional question, which somehow seemed easy to answer.

“ You are alone ? Yes ! Then it is altogether your child. You have all the responsibility. It's sometimes a temptation for girls, who are alone like you are, not to be very careful. If you have a child you want it to be strong and well, don't you ? ”

“ I want her to be the beautifullest baby—— ” Lu's eyes glowed.

“ Then you must be always thinking of her ; ” the doctor caught up the pronoun with ready tact. “ Work won't hurt you, not now anyhow ; but you must eat well. And try and get out in the open ; and live as you'd like her to live when she grows up. It will be about a couple of months. Come and see me in another month, unless you feel ill, then come to me at once, and don't be afraid of worrying me. Don't forget that ; come at once if you are the least bit anxious.”

Lu murmured her thanks. Then, jogged in the side by Mrs. Platt, tendered, with a crimson face, the half-crown she had ready done up in a piece of paper. For a moment the doctor hesitated, then took it.

“ Thank you—now that means that you are my patient and that you can come and see me whenever you want to without paying me any more : ” and she shook hands. Then glanced from the tall girl with the wonderful eyes to Mrs. Platt.

"You're not her mother are you?" And she turned again towards Lu:—"You come from the country surely?"

"Yes—up along the Ranges." There was a singing sound in Lu's voice, and her eyes swam with tears, through which she seemed to see the phalanx of tall gums; the triangular patch of distance; the ring-barked trees, with their white, beckoning arms.

"Can't you go home. You have people—you have a home?"

"No, miss;" answered Lu; hesitated a moment, then added simply: "He's gone away; back to England."

The doctor thought of her own well-ordered, evenly balanced existence; her innumerable friends and relations, comparing her own life with this, narrowed down to one absent "he;" and her eyes filled: though her pity was not all for the girl who stood before her, uttering that small pronoun as though it were the name of a god.

"Never mind. In another couple of months, if all goes well, you'll hold your home in your own arms. And be sure you come and see me at once if you're frightened, or don't feel well."

Lu promised; but she would not have dared to go again had she not met the doctor by chance one day, and been reminded that the month was nearly at an end.

Then she went twice; was given her ticket for the hospital and told she must stop working so hard and not live alone any more.

The doctor was attracted by the girl's uncommon beauty and vitality; and even more by her rare courage and passionate delight in the thought of her child. But Lu was not easy to help, answering every question with the assertion that she had all she could need and was quite well. For though she managed to return from her work through Collins Street each day, taking a considerable *détour* on the mere chance of meeting her new friend, she made no confidences, and—after that first time—never even mentioned Orde.

It was suggested that she should go into a Refuge Home. But Lu remembered Win, and the very thought of any "Home" with a capital, filled her with horror. Besides Julian might return sooner than she expected; and if she was shut up she would not see him. Would not even know he had

arrived if she were unable to slip down to the Customs House, as she had been in the habit of doing, to read the shipping notices: never doubting but that he would return by the same boat as that on which he had departed.

The tea-room was given up first. Lu was sorry to leave, though Miss Mack said she could come back when her trouble was over—a phrase the girl vaguely resented. The waitresses had been good to her, never slighting her or questioning her; the only remark they ever made on her condition being that she was “a nice kid” and it was “a shaeme.”

But with them all, as with Mrs. Platt, there was a curious delicacy displayed in regard to the deeper things of life; though at times their talk was gross enough. The only person who made her feel uncomfortable was Miss Mack herself who, having passed forty years free from any hint of temptation, was devoured by curiosity: while an elderly woman, who came in for tea early one afternoon—when Miss Mack was changing her dress—declared that Lu was a disgrace to the place; that she had believed it to be respectable: that she should not come there again, “encouraging vice!” she called it.

“You’ll have to go;” said Miss Mack pathetically, for she was fond of Lu, who was not afraid of work and never cheeked her. “You see: they won’t stand it and the men do stare and no mistake.”

“Odd they don’t not get used to it,” commented Mrs. Platt, when she was told, “seein’ as how the world’s gone on being populated in the same old way for a fairish while. But now the only thing’s to see what’s to be done. You can’t go on living in that room alone neither, you know what Doctor Barton said. You could ’a come to me, only there’s Jim as is chronic, an’ the children—we’re a bit sociable in one room as it is.”

So once again Lu began to take in a daily paper, scanning it till she sickened at the very sight of the close columns of murky print and smell of damp ink.

At last she found what she wanted. A retiring little advertisement of the type Mrs. Platt had advised her to look for.

“Home offered to a young woman awaiting confinement, in return for light assistance. Married or unmarried; near hospital.”

Unfortunately one of Mrs. Platt's many children happened to be ill, so that she could not go with Lu the day she applied for this post, and got it.

"I could 'a told in a brace o' shakes what sort they was:" she declared regretfully. But still, whatever it was, nothing else offered; and with a dull feeling of foreboding the two women sold off Lu's small stock of furniture; packed her few personal belongings in a wooden box and despatched it to its destination by carrier.

"I don't like it," said Mrs. Platt. "I don't see how there's anything else to be done, but that's no sayin' as how I like it. It do seem cruel we can't have you: but then there's no denyin' we *are* a bit o' a crush; my man down with rheumatism, an' the five children an' all. Poor kid," and holding Lu to her ample breast she kissed her soundly; "it's a shame, that it is!"

They all said that, and Lu wished they would not. Somehow it seemed like a slight on Julian and the baby. But how kind Mrs. Platt was. Looking back Lu saw her still standing where she had left her, amid a barricade of brooms and pails; but seeing the girl turn, the kindly creature waved her hand; then, with a sudden plunge down the steps, came after her.

"Wait a minute," she panted; "I clean forgot, I've got something for you:" and she fumbled in the pocket of her petticoat; brought out a grimy handkerchief; undid the knot in the corner with her teeth; and producing a sixpenny piece with a hole in it, pressed it into Lu's hand.

"For luck, my dear;" she said; and embraced her again.

## CHAPTER XIX

CERTAINLY no luck of any sort was to be found at 25, Lily Road. There were other girls there besides Lu, four of whom were awaiting their confinement; but they paid two pounds a week, and did not have to work; though they got little enough for their money and were mulched of a whole ten pounds when they were ill. There was also the curiously repulsive woman of the house—white and flabby with swollen eyelids—who padded about the place silently in felt slippers: and there was someone who called himself a doctor, coming and going



at intervals—with a mysterious buzz of talk—which made Lu think of a blowfly.

But that was not the worst. The four girls slept in one room. But there were others who had rooms to themselves, who had been away and come back again ; putting out their babies to nurse, simply because they did not know what else to do, and Mrs. Alldyce had told them they would always find a home with her. They were all pretty—these who had been asked to return ; and they did no work either, though Mother Alldyce told her that they gave French lessons to the gentlemen who came there.

Indeed Lu was the only person in the house who did work, excepting for a woman who came in to do the cooking, and she worked all day, from dawn to midnight. Yet without any hope or pleasure ; feeling it as impossible to grapple with the actual dirt of the place, as it was to overcome the sinister atmosphere of moral filth.

But work saved and helped her. The water at least was clean as it ran out of the tap, and the soapsuds were white before they touched the floors : though the very air which entered from the mean street, filtering in through the tightly drawn lace curtains, was polluted ; while her tiny basement-room, which led out of the kitchen, was sickly with the odour of cockroaches.

She would not go and see Mrs. Platt ; and wrote a card entreating her not to come, as she might be leaving any day. Neither could she bring herself to go and see Doctor Barton, or tell her where she was ; or Miss Mack or the girls in the tea-room, with all of whom she had promised to communicate ; for she felt tainted by her surroundings ; as if—should she go out in the street—everyone would stare and draw aside from her. As a matter of fact she never did go out, and sickened so in the vitiated atmosphere of the place, that, save for her splendid store of vitality, she might have died.

At the first hint of pain, Mother Alldyce, as the girls called her, hustled Lu off to the hospital ; for she had no ten pounds, and would be nothing but a burden when she could no longer work. But she told her she would keep her box till she came out again : even asked her to return.

“ I don’t often take girls back that haven’t money. But you could do a little light work in the house, and help earn

your keep in other ways ;” she said, for she saw that there was the making of a beauty in the girl’s black hair, green eyes and white skin ; had also noticed the way that any of the men who met her in the passages, or on the stairs, had stared. But Lu felt she would rather die first. She was mad to get away, to breathe clean air again ; while she somehow believed that the coming of her child, the dignity of motherhood might cleanse her.

“ I suppose I’d better see you across ;” grumbled Mrs. Alldyce ; “ the police ’ud be down on me if anything happened—as though it were my fault ! But I’m not going to show my nose inside that place, no thank you, I’ve had impudence enough and to spare from those young hussies of nurses before now.”

And so, after infinite delay, while Mrs. Alldyce put on her bonnet and took “ a little drop to keep her up,” they started off together ; and Lu was escorted to the hospital gate ; instructed to remember that she’d got a friend ; reminded, in case she forgot the fact, that “ the friend ” still held her box. And then, with her small bundle of necessities under her arm, left to find her own way in. To interview a porter and to give up her ticket ; to be told to wait, and to sit drooping on a hard bench ; to be taken in tow, after a long pause, by an alert, red-haired nurse ; interviewed by a cool and nonchalant student, and stout harassed doctor ; bathed and dressed and have her hair combed—all as if she was feeling quite strong and well. And finally, in nightgown and wrapper, with two tight black plaits at either side of her face, led off to the lying-in ward, the nurse carrying her bundle and propelling her along briskly by the elbow.

There was only one good thing about it all : the whole place was clean. It smelt of soap and beeswax ; it was flooded with fresh air and sunshine ; while the oilcloth on the corridor shone like glass. It was terribly strange ; while everyone showed an indifference in comparison with which the curiosity at No. 25 seemed almost kindly. But it was clean and Lu drew a deep breath of sheer delight.

“ It’s the smell ;” she said. “ My word, but it smells good.”

## CHAPTER XX

THE long ward was divided down its length by cubicles, reaching half-way across the breadth : so that the open space was as wide as that which they occupied. Against the wall at the opposite side was a long table, crowded with bottles and jars of blue cotton-wool—but unbrightened by any of the pot plants or flowers so often seen in such places—where a very young, dark nurse, with brilliant carmine cheeks sat writing. She raised her head as Lu entered, stared at her figure coldly for a moment, and then addressed Nurse Calvert.

“ Soon ? ”

“ A matter of an hour or so ; I suppose. Where shall I put her ? ”

“ In the end bed ; all the others are full up. I only hope she’ll look sharp about it. It’s just my time off, and sometimes Sister won’t let us go if there’s anyone nearly through : says it upsets them. Such footling nonsense ; as if they would be here at all if they were as particular as all that. The end bed, Calvy.” And the young nurse ; horribly and hardly young as it seemed to Lu, bent her trim, untouched figure over the table, and set her straight red lips, and knitted her brow : once more engrossed in the pile of temperature charts which lay spread out before her, and utterly regardless of the cries and moans which went on all around.

Feeling as though she were in a dream, Lu was led to the end cubicle and helped into bed ; the nurse good-naturedly, lifting her feet, which seemed incredibly far away and heavy ; covering her over and telling her to lie straight—which she could not possibly do.

“ You’ll be all right. I’ll go and tell Sister.”

“ Are you going ? ” Lu gasped, her mouth round and dry like a fish out of water. She had hated the brisk, red-haired nurse ; but now she clung to her, for she seemed almost an old friend in this terrible place ; and, for the time being, Lu was all human, could not bear to be left alone, clung to any straw that offered itself in the dark sea of unknown agony which lay before her ; for, bad as the pain already was, the

real horror lay in the fact that she had no idea how much worse it might yet become.

"Yes, I can't stay; I'm in the receiving-room and have nothing to do here but bring in the new patients. I'm off in another half-hour anyhow, thank goodness! Now, good-bye, and be a good girl; it's your own fault you know, you brought it on yourself." And nodding cheerfully she whisked off round the corner of the cubicle.

It seemed to Lu that she lay on that hard straight bed for an eternity before Julian's son was born. An eternity broken only by flying visits from the nurses, and Sister, and a magisterial interview with the matron; while the whole concern of everyone appeared to be centred on the necessity for lying still and keeping the counterpane tidy.

The partitions between the cubicles were of thin wood, and every sound could be heard. A young almost childish voice next to hers called without ceasing on the name of "Mother!"

"Mother, mother, mother!" In a monotonous grinding moan; while from the ward-kitchen at the other side came the sound of laughter; and the rattle of cups and saucers.

Indeed everyone in the ward seemed to be calling on God or their Mother. And somehow it seemed natural to Lu; for never—since the old days of starvation—had she so longed for her own mother; who at that moment, for the first time for years, she realized as something that had once been a real and tangible part of her very life. As for God, "the bogey Man of craven imaginations," as Julian had called Him: with a sense of treason, came the thought that perhaps Julian might have been mistaken. Men like him did not need a God: then even "he" had said that we got what we were fit for. And for women—herself and these others—there might be *Someone*. Anyhow she would say a sort of prayer. If He was not there it would not matter. If He was it might help. Though, after all, was it not somewhere in His Book—she and Julian had read the Bible together: "There's something like literature!" he would say—that it was written: "The wages of sin are death." But why sin if it was He who had made people, and made them like that? And told them to be fruitful and multiply. And how horribly selfish it would have been to let Julian be miserable after all he had done for her.



The only break in the long desert of pain, over which she clenched her teeth till they ached, was when a baby was born in a cubicle at the far end of the ward.

It was heralded by a cry: so long drawn and anguished that Lu sat up in bed: her cheeks flaming the blood pumping through her veins.

What was happening? How horrible, how unutterably horrible! How could the girl next to her go on crying for her mother: how could anyone think of self at such a time?

But apparently the rest of the sufferers were quite unmoved, for the undercurrent of moans and cries went on without even a break; while a couple of nurses, in the next room, still chattered and laughed.

Presently one of the other nurses—whose name was Brown—ran through to the kitchen. There was a sound of running water, and she came out dragging a tin bath and carrying a steaming can, with an armful of towels and small garments. Placed them on the floor just opposite Lu's bed, and putting a match to the gas-jet turned it up in a spluttering flame of blue light: disappeared for a moment, and returned again with a feebly stirring bundle in her arms. Sat down with her knees well apart, unrolled the flannel; and drawing forth a diminutive morsel of protesting humanity, began to bathe it.

Lu sat up in bed, her eyes shining with excitement, almost forgetting her pain.

The nurse did wonderful things to the baby, in the deftest and quickest fashion. It seemed no time while it was being bathed and bandaged, and powdered and sewn up—floured over, like the jam rolls Lu once made for the boys. She was a coarse, big girl with ugly red hands, and thick-lipped mouth; but Lu's respect for her grew to a height of amazed wonder, as she watched the fashion in which she twisted and turned the writhing, whimpering creature round on her knee, as unconcernedly as if it were a lump of dough.

Rising, with the compact, flannel-rolled bundle in her arms, and an avalanche of towels at her feet, the nurse turned and caught sight of Lu's eager face, peering at her above a rampart of knees and tossed white counterpane.

"Here, number eight!" she said, and moved over to the girl's side. "Can you make room for this squeaker for a moment, while I clear up. The mother's not ready for it

yet. Here you are. Good Lord ! look at your bed ; and it's no time since I tidied you up. Lie down, there now take it in your arms ; but mind you don't roll over on it. Not that it would be missed, poor little wretch !"

"Roll over on it——" when Lu's whole body and mind was bent on guarding and cherishing the little creature, while she examined it minutely.

It had the most wonderful, crinkled red hands, and a quantity of dark down on its head. Its eyes were screwed up tight ; but it's mouth was open, and with unfailing instinct it nosed round against Lu's breast.

All the girl's fear was gone. The pains were bad ; but she did not care. Every one seemed like a step forward, towards the goal of her desire : the complete personal possession of a creature such as she held in her arms. She felt like she did the day she rode the chestnut brumbie, possessed by a spirit of absolute fearlessness and wild exhilaration.

She was a long while : other babies were born and the mothers wheeled off triumphantly on a long stretcher. The whole staff changed ; and there was a general settling down for the night : a general atmosphere of annoyance at the long waiting.

Then at last—just as the doctor had got off to bed—Lu's child was born. And he had been called up again, very much annoyed because, in their anxiety to spare him, they had put it off much later than they ought to have done : snapping at everyone in between his yawns ; and demanding so many things at once that every nurse in the ward, and even the Sister, was kept running ; while Lu felt that she was giving an unwarrantable amount of trouble, and ought to get up and help. Only what could one do when one was so helpless. And after all nobody seemed to consider her ; though they discussed her quite openly ; using long words that were almost an insult in their intelligibility.

And suddenly feeling very sorry for herself she began to cry : till one of the nurses told her there was nothing to cry about. And then she remembered that, after all, it was she who was going to have the baby and was the chief actor in the drama ; and that, despite their airs, the nurses would have nothing to show for all their trouble. After which her mind ceased to work. Every sense, even that of decency, being lost in

a seething fury of pain. The whole world revolved round her. Nay, she herself was the world, suffering a fiery disruption.

Then, quite suddenly—when it seemed that the end could never come—there was a wailing cry, which went straight to her heart, and ran like wine through her cold empty veins.

And the nurse said :—“ Why it’s a carrotty !”

And Lu heard herself ask, in a voice that sounded very far away, and with a whistling breath through her aching teeth :—

“ Is it a girl ?”

And the doctor said :—“ No, it’s a boy.”

And Lu said “ Damn !”

And the doctor laughed : and the Sister said : “ Oh, I’m shocked !”

And the doctor laughed again and said :—“ Plucky little beggar, eh, what ?”

So another man-child was born into the world. And it had red hair ! Fancy already ! How cute of it ! Lu wondered if it was crisp and crimped like Julian’s, and if it’s eyes were red-brown too.

## CHAPTER XXI

AFTER the baby was born Lu was moved up to ward number twelve, and was there for ten days. The baby was put into a little wire swing-cradle at her side ; for she was not allowed to have it in bed with her except when she was feeding it ; and, as the cradle was some eight inches higher than her bed she suffered agonies each time she lifted it in and out, for fear of banging its head against the nobbly sides.

The first three days she was fed on sago boiled in milk and water, and got terribly hungry, for the baby was lusty and had a fine appetite. After that she was fed on tripe, or very scaly fish, and still got hungry and desperately thirsty, particularly between the half-cup of milk which was her last meal at seven o’clock in the evening, and breakfast at eight next morning.

Lu hated the night : so did the baby. He did not like the quality of his meals, besides he got cold in his little cot, and knew that it was unnatural for a person of his age to be sleeping all alone like that, instead of nestling in a warm

haven of breast and arm. Lu persistently endeavoured to keep him in her bed for a little while after the light went out, in hopes that the night-nurse would not notice. However, she always did notice ; and the baby had to be put back and cried insistently ; just in the same way that Lu remembered the poddy-fed lambs crying when they were pushed outside the house, away from the warmth of the kitchen fire. And the patients would toss and groan and complain : and the nurse would be very angry, and rail both at Lu and her baby : for she had three wards to look after, and was studying for an examination in between whiles, so had no time to spare.

"That child's voice is enough to drive one silly!" she declared. "He doesn't even cry like the others." And she was right, for his cry was florid as Julian's smooth rounded tones when he read Lamentations or Jeremiah ; it seemed to Lu's sensitive ears that the other babies cried as their mothers talked, in that drawling twang, which, if she had but known it, was pure cockney : her baby was indeed different : there was no other baby like it.

Sometimes Nurse Wrench took it and gave it warm water with a little sugar, or even a spot of brandy ; which it greatly enjoyed : putting two fingers into its mouth and letting it dribble down them. But that was when she was in a good temper : usually she did no more than rail at Lu, and ask her why she could not keep that wretched child of hers quiet. Then one night she declared that it could be endured no longer.

"One kid can't be allowed to keep the entire ward awake:" she said. If Lu's baby was quiet some other baby was sure to be crying ; but she did not seem to notice them so much. Anyhow she said it was time that it learnt better ; that it was quite old enough to be taught to control itself—it was four days old ! Then she took it up and shook it ; and, as it only cried the more, deliberately undid sundry garments and smacked it soundly.

All the time Lu had been in hospital she had been very meek. The routine of the place ; the sense of being one of many had awed her. Besides, she lay low for the baby's sake ; she was afraid they would "take it out on him" if she gave any trouble. But now she sat up in bed, her eyes blazing in



the light of the gas-jet—which flared on the opposite wall—her long black plaits hanging straight either side of her face, like a *Mænäde* for fury, and cursed the woman.

All the obscenities she had heard at the farm and never even realized that she remembered : all the bushman's elaborate blasphemies : all the abuse that can possibly be heaped upon anything female, she heaped upon that nurse : cursing her with a savage intensity which caused every sleeper to awake, the occupant of every bed to turn on her back and stare with amazement.

"Lie down at once, you wicked, filthy-mouthed girl ! How dare you talk to me like that. I'll report you. I'll have you turned out of the hospital." Nurse Wrench's voice shook, but not so much with anger as with fear at the storm she had provoked.

But her words were swept aside like dried leaves before the wind : "Give me my baby, you—you——" stormed Lu, every adjective redolent of the soil. "Give me my baby : and by God if you touch him again, I'll out of this bed and wring your neck for you, you blanky rabbit-catcher !" she raved, the bush name for a midwife springing instinctively to her lips. "So help me God I'll kill you, as sure as hell !——" She broke short as the sudden memory of Julian swept over her : the thought of his horror and disgust at such an outburst. "Give me that baby at once !" She spoke with the clear, crisp intonation that he had taught her. But the way she pointed, the effect she gave, by sheer force of her passionate vitality, as if of hurling herself upon the amazed woman—in spite of the fact that she remained upright and motionless in her bed—had the same effect as in the old days, when she dominated Harold, and the baby was put in her arms.

"I shall report you to-morrow:" said the woman, but she shrank back before Lu's hard stare of scorn.

"Report away ! Report any damned old thing you jolly well please. But remember there'll be two playing at that game ; and if you ever lay a finger on my baby again, it'll not stop at reporting ; I'll kill you—kill you, as sure as I'm lying here."

Next morning Lu's temperature had risen. And it continued to rise, in spite of all that the house-surgeon could do ; until a specialist was summoned from the aloof sanctity of Collins Street.

The Sister questioned her, so did the Matron, but they got nothing out of Lu. Neither did the specialist, save a request for something to drink ; for she was burning with fever ; so dry she felt that the baby, which tugged fretfully at her breasts, would die of thirst ; as if she herself must be covered with dust ; her eyes glazed like those of a drought-stricken sheep. For the over-worked nurses—irritable with the realization that they had no time to do anything properly—would have been kept running all day if they had once given in to the patients' desire for water ; and no drinks were allowed between meals, though the ward thermometer showed over a hundred.

But the doctor inquired of Lu if there was anything she would like, and when she asked for soda-water ordered it. She had one drink ; then the syphon was left on the shelf of the ward kitchen, within sight, though quite out of reach ; while her mouth and lips cracked, and she longed for the night, which now held no terrors for her.

The day nurses had glanced at Lu sideways, when the matron and sisters had questioned her, and she guessed that they had heard something of the scene which had occurred and wondered what she would say. But Lu had no intention of telling. She was stronger than Nurse Wrench ; strong enough to be silent and remain silent on the subject ; for she had no more fear of her—it was only when she was trying to be good that she was so weak, and easily bullied. It had not paid : she had tried it, found it a dire failure, and did not mean to tread the same track again. Besides, she realized that she held her enemy in the hollow of her hand. She was fully aware that there would be trouble if it was known any nurse had smacked a four days' old baby. The adjacent wards must have realized all that passed ; indeed it seemed to Lu as if she could again hear her own voice, cutting through the silence of the night ; and if Nurse Wrench was as much disliked in the other wards, as in this, the evidence would be strong against her. In any case it was a point of honour that, whatever their private differences might be, the patients should hold together in their mutual antagonism to the nurses.

There were ten other girls in the ward, and one married woman. They had scarcely noticed Lu before ; but from that night onward, she became their idol. Even the married

woman, bitterly as she scorned the "light hussies," sided with her against the general enemy.

To Lu's right was the girl who had been in the next cubicle in the lying-in ward, and who had called on her mother. Her name was Gladys May ; she was not yet eighteen, and this was her third child.

"Mother looks after them ;" she announced cheerfully. "T'ain't my fault. I'm that kind-hearted an' the chaps do come it over me, an' no mistake."

"It's a shame," said the girl in the furthest corner from Lu, turning her tear-stained face round from the wall : "it's all wrong : why should we be the only ones to suffer ? That's what I want to know."

"Well, crying won't alter it, so what's the good of moopin' ? Let's be jolly ; that's what I say, let's be jolly while we can : " remarked the girl who had screamed so loudly—for the whole ward was filled with patients that had been admitted the same evening as Lu. Rosie was a vain chatterbox ; her round face was pink again, as smooth and innocent as a child's. She tied up her plaits above either ear with blue ribbon and wore a brooch in front of the coarse, unbleached calico garment, which was all the night-gear the hospital allowed, and which was split down the front like a coat, and very short.

Once when the nurse was absent Rosie gathered hers around her—showing a length of plump leg and rounded knee—and jumping out of bed ran bare-footed to the kitchen to fetch Lu a drink, as light as a fawn in spite of her baby being only four days' old. But then she was never still. When the nurse was out of the ward she flung back the bedclothes and exercised her feet and legs ; even curling her pink toes round the bar at the back of her : while, when they were present, she was always rubbing and massaging beneath the clothes ; for Rosie was an acrobatic dancer and knew that she could not afford to let herself stiffen, being shrewd enough in spite of all her childishness.

"My boy's an acrobat too ; but a real swagger sort. My eye, but you should just see him doing the trapeze, right up ever so high ! He swings off, and his chum as he plays with—as they call Boko—he swings off at the same time ; and it's—well it's pretty well the width of this old badger-box between the two trapezes, and right up a'top, mind you ; ever so high !

So that you have to fling your head right back, till your neck cracks, to see him. I feel as though some 'un had just caught on ter my heart and held it from beating, every time as he does it. He's a real wonder he is—though I says it as shouldn't : there's not one of 'em but will give him best."

" You an' your boy ! You're always blowing about your boy. I wish you'd shut up and let me go to sleep : " growled another.

" Jealous ! jealous ! " mocked the child-mother, snatching her baby from the cot, laying it against her raised knees, and bouncing up and down on the spring mattress, a favourite mode of exercise in the ward. " Jealous ! jealous ! jealous ! ain't she pretty one ? But never mind—we'll make an acrobat of him, as will twist himself into such knots as no one will know t'other end from which ; a top-knotter, eh, babsem ? Like his daddy afore him ; just such another."

" It's a pity he don't not marry you, an' make an honest girl of you : " said the married woman, who had the bed to the right of Lu.

" My troubles ! thank you ! After all I don't see what there's to swank about in being married ; half the married women up at Rickard's have to keep their Benjamins as well as themselves an' their kids. All work an' no play, that's what it is when once you're married ; no more lovey-doving, no more fun. No thank you, not for this child ! "

The girl in the corner whose name was Mimi, and who had a fresh, country face and straight black brows, turned half round.

" It's a shame, that's what it is. It's a shame from beginning to end. They drive us from pillar to post. My mother says I needn't not show my face there again until he marries me ; an' if he married me I wouldn't not go back there not for nothing—poddy feeding calves from mornin' to night ; and up at all hours along o' those beastly men. I can't not go back home : and I can't not get a place with that there kid. It's a shame, that's what it is, a shame ! " And again she turned her face to the wall : a good girl who would have made a good wife and mother ; and yet the only one in the ward who resented her child's presence, who bore any real grudge against fate, or reviled the man who had cheated her of her rightful destiny.



"There's things vat is better nor fun ;" remarked the married woman, who was a naturalized German, returning to Rosie's words ; for her mind worked slowly, with what the girls called "the Government stroke."

"There is things vat is better nor fun ; and there's things that is worse than work. An' one of them is to see your own child ashamed of its mother. That bites ter the bone. Vorse nor barco-rot that is."

A sudden silence fell over the ward which—in spite of all the girls having so lately suffered agonies such as few men dream of, even in battle—was for the most part animated by a spirit of indomitable gaiety. Then someone forced a laugh.

"Well, you're a nice old cup of tea, I must say, Mrs. Schwartz. A nice ad. for matrimony you are, and no mistake ; as miserable as a shag on a rock !"

The acrobatic dancer sat up in bed, with a sharp movement of the shoulders, as if to shake herself free from a sudden brooding despondency : then hugged her baby to her breast.

"I don't believe it, anyhow ;" she said : "I don't believe as my own kid 'ud ever give me the go-bye."

"Don't you neither ;" advised Gladys. "No girl could be fonder of her mother than I am ; though she was a gay 'un and no mistake. Why there's girls as don't care that for their mothers ;" here she snapped her fingers derisively : "and them as straight as number eleven on a cottage door. Look at that young Mimi there ! No, no, my dears, love don't go that way. I could tell you a thing or two concernin' married folk——"

But at that moment the nurse entered the ward, and in a twinkling twelve babies were back in their cots, twelve heads lying placidly on their pillows, above neatly folded counterpanes.

## CHAPTER XXII

THERE were moments like these when the future seemed to thrust out its gnarled hand between them and all their little happinesses ; when the girls would lie quiet, with their clothes drawn up over their heads. And then the sordid ugliness of the dreadfully clean place, bare of any single book, or flower,

or germ-collecting nicety—allowed, even encouraged in other sick-rooms—seemed to Lu beyond all bearing.

But in general these women, for the most part little more than children themselves, were cheerful enough. Excepting for Mimi—and Lu who never mentioned Orde—they talked of their “boys,” or their “chaps,” the fathers of their children, with no signs of resentment, or malice, though five of them had disappeared as soon as the trouble became evident, but rather with a sort of tolerant, contemptuous pity. Men were made that way, they said, it was not their fault; for like all their class they had very little opinion of the other sex.

It had always been their mothers who had managed everything, arranged everything; and, in many cases, been the whole support of the family.

Men went on the drink, or they went West. Men were soft. They themselves had been soft, but only for this once: excepting in Gladys's case. And here was the end of that sort of larking; for here was the child who—owing to the fact of its arrival being outside the matrimonial fold, giving its father no excuse to get drunk and talk big to his fellows—must bear their name, and depend on them alone for its support.

But they had accepted the fact, as they accepted most things in life, with the jaunty courage of Australian girlhood. They were neither crushed nor ashamed; while for the time being, the child was all-sufficient.

For the mother-love in this ward of unrepentant Magdalenes was something stupendous. When a baby had the colic and cried, or drew up its little knees; or would not drink, or came out in spots, the anxiety on the girlish faces was poignant beyond all words: while their terms of endearment, the glorifying pride on their faces, as they bounced up and down on their mattresses, with their babies against their knees, produced an atmosphere of love, as tangible as the smell of flowers, as light or air.

Indeed, it would have puzzled a casual visitor to classify these patients, and utterly bewildered any moralist. For their expression was as far removed from the settled air of matrimony, as from the vice usually associated with such places; the worst anyone could say, even of Gladys, being that she was silly; and inordinately proud of her very plain offspring.

Indeed, the only one, excepting Mimi, who did not appear quite pleased with her baby was the married woman, weary-faced and leather-skinned, whose husband was a waiter, and who already had six children. "It's not that I does not love them:" she said: "but they eats. Gott in Himmel how they does eat! Awkward ain't no word for it."

The night after Lu's outburst, Nurse Wrench took no notice of the girl during her first round, which was mainly for the purpose of seeing that the babies were all in their own cots, which they never were.

On her second visit she found that Lu had her child in bed with her, and bade her take it out, and pat it off to sleep when it began to cry—as it naturally did, the moment it was taken from its mother's side; for it was impossible for the occupant of the bed to lift it into the cot, over the high wire side, without awakening it. But though the nurse spoke coldly, she appeared subdued and a little anxious.

The next time she entered the ward everyone was asleep, excepting Lu, who was very feverish; while the baby still cried, not loudly, but fretfully and insistently; suffering from the commotion which had been going on in its mother's mind, and hating the whole world.

"Take it into bed with you, and nurse it for a little while:" all the babies, male and female were "it" with the nurses, a fact which every mother in the place resented. "But you must not lie down, and you must only keep it till it drops off. When it's asleep I'll come back and put it into its cot without awaking it.

Nurse Wrench spoke with deliberate coldness, as if to modify the kindness of her intention. Then, as she turned to go she volunteered the first explanation Lu had ever heard given in that place:—"We are obliged to be very particular; the girls overlie their babies, and then there's trouble."

Presently the child dropped asleep and she returned and laid it in the cot: then stood a moment regarding Lu's flushed face, while the girl watched her like a tiger ready to spring.

"Why do you push your pillow up against the rail like that? Turn your face from the light and lie down, you'll never go to sleep in that fashion." Lu made no reply to this, and after a moment the nurse went on: "I see you've been running a

temperature : I suppose you worked yourself up into a fine state reciting all your wrongs to Matron this morning."

Still Lu did not answer ; and the woman—who was older than any of the other nurses, and desperately anxious to get through her course of training without a hitch—moved toward the end of the bed, then turned :—

" Well out with it—what did you tell her ?" she demanded ; for she was no favourite with the others ; and, neither making nor giving confidences, had no idea what had actually occurred during that morning's inspection. Though she knew that to lay a hand on either woman or child meant instant dismissal, and everyone in the ward, had seen what took place.

" I told her as much as you did— " Lu answered drily—" no more, no less." The woman's face reddened dusily, in the fluttering gaslight, and she peered forward doubtfully at the girl who lay almost upright, her cheeks flushed, her eyes wide open.

" An' that's nothing ;" added Lu after a malicious pause.

" You didn't tell ?"

" No—I didn't."

" Not when they asked what had upset you ?"

" No."

Nurse Wrench had a profound scorn for every unmarried mother in the world ; for every woman who had failed to make, or to ratify, her bargain. She was a widow with two children herself ; but that made her no softer, for matrimony seems like a petrifying spring to some natures.

" Cheapening themselves !" she said, though it was the cheapening of the marriage market that she really minded. But even her cold nature recognized the depth of Lu's maternal passion, which in an unmarried woman stood for mere animalism ; while she realized that the girl, holding both her and her future career at her mercy, had refrained from any act of revenge ; though that same fine and untameable quality in Lu's nature had irritated her into, what she knew to be, an unfailing series of petty tyrannies and insults.

" Thank you : " she said. It was a *gauche* enough form of atonement and concession ; but at the time it was all that she was capable of. And, after hesitating a moment or two, on pretence of studying the temperature chart over Lu's bed, she went away.



After a little she returned. "I see on the list that the doctor has ordered you drinks when you want them. Are you thirsty, is there anything you would like now?"

"No, thank you!" Lu could hardly speak. Her mouth was like a lime-kiln, her breasts were hard and throbbing intolerably; but, though she had scorned to take the revenge offered to her, she would ask nothing of this woman who had struck her baby.

Presently however, the nurse returned. "I've brought you a drink:" she said; and put down the cup she was carrying beside Lu's bed. By this time other women in the ward were awake, feeding their children, and immediately several voices were raised, all begging for drinks.

"Nonsense—I can't be running with water for all you girls; three wards to attend to—there'd be no end to it! Number ten has a temperature, that's the reason I gave it to her."

The mothers sank back, and in a moment or two were asleep. They had merely asked, but they had not expected their demand to be acceded to, and were in no wise disappointed. After a little, Lu put out her hand and raised the cup to her lips; it was full of tea, still hot, sweet and strong, and without milk. It ran warmly through her veins, soothing the intolerable ache, moistening the fierce dryness of her skin; and, what is more, calming the fiery resentment which during the entire day had kept every nerve at a tension. And turning on her side, with one finger thrust through the wire of her baby's cot, and folded round by it's tiny hand, she slept till morning.

## CHAPTER XXIII

NEXT day the truth of Nurse Wrench's words regarding the necessity of the law, which relegated babies to their own cots, was made evident. When the day nurse came in at six o'clock, and placed a tin basin of water at each girl's side, bidding her make haste and wash herself, Mimi in the corner—who had been wakeful during the night, crying in her usual subdued sort of fashion—did not move; though Rosie thrust out her foot from the adjoining bed, and administered a vigorous stirring with her bare toes.

"Wake up Mimi ; you'll get it, and no mistake when she comes back for the slop bowls !"

"Lord !" said another sitting up in bed and craning over to see the fun : "did you ever know such a girl to sleep ? Tweak her pillow from under her head ; that's a real dart for awakin' anyone. Pull her pillow from under her head, Rosie !"

Rosie tweaked the corner of the pillow as she was bid, and it fell on the floor ; but Mimi only rolled a little more over, with a heavy snore ; and did not even awake when her neighbour—frightened at what she had done—jumped out of bed and thrust it again beneath her head.

All the girls were washed and combed by the time the nurse came in from her breakfast—all excepting Mimi who still slept ; and the nurse, in a tantrum, caught her by the shoulder and shook her sharply.

"Wake up ! Do you hear, wake up ! I've got the ward to sweep, and I want to clear these basins away. My word, did you ever see such a girl for sleeping ?"

"Dreaming she's a cow, and got her head in the bail : " giggled Rosie, in reference to Mimi's profession of milkmaid.

"Laziness !" snapped the nurse and flung back the clothes, on which Mimi turned round with a loud yawn. And the nurse—who had never even glanced at the little pile of clothes in the cot, for so many babies slept at that hour—started upright with a white face, put her finger to the electric bell and set it pealing till another nurse came ; when screens were put round the corner bed, and there was a great deal of running about and whispering, through which the others could hear Mimi whimpering, not exactly crying.

"She's squashed the kid : " whispered Rosie. And all their cheeks were flushed, their eyes round and bright with a sort of terrible excitement, as they snatched up their babies and began to feed them.

"It's a judgment of Gott !" remarked Mrs. Schwartz, who had always seemed to like her bed to herself ; and for once none of the girls found spirit for any retort.

The matron spoke of it when she came her rounds. "I hope it will be a lesson to all of you to obey the rules !" she said. And it was ; though it was the first time any one of them realized why such a rule had been made.

The whole of that day the screens were up round Mimi, and the others peered in vain to catch sight of the scene of the tragedy, through any possible crack ; while Mimi whimpered and sniffed, and there was much coming and going and whispering of questions ; and the extra nurses who helped at meal-times, or when the babies were bathed or the temperatures taken, glanced at the ward nurse, pushed up their lower lips and jerked their heads significantly.

Then in the first silences of the night, came a sibilant whisper along the ranks ; from Gladys and Rosie, and Irene and Ada each to their neighbour.

“ She done it on purpose.”

At first that was all : then there were other additions. She was frightened to go home, her mother was one of those strict chapel folk. “ My word, but ain’t it awful ?” they declared ; then :—

“ She’ll go to Hell—She’ll go to prison—She’ll be hanged.” The horror grew, stone upon stone was added to the edifice. Then, again, with a hissing sound came the words :—

“ She did it a’ purpose. She’ll go to Hell for sure, she did it a’ purpose.”

The whisper dropped at Mrs. Schwartz’s bedside. But after a while it seemed to permeate the entire ward ; till at last it reached Mimi.

“ It’s a lie !” came a voice from behind the screen ; “ it’s a cruel lie !”

But somehow the words were inconclusive ; and the next morning when Mimi again lay in the open—gazing straight before her, with swollen, resentful eyes—though the girls inquired how she was, honestly endeavouring to behave in their usual manner, they kept their own gaze steadily averted.

“ Poor kid ! it weren’t no how the kid’s fault !” said Irene, and voiced the general feeling of the entire ward, which was plunged in a gloom of which Mrs. Schwartz took instant advantage !”

“ Hell’s an awful place !” she announced, over the weak tea and bread-and-butter at breakfast, apropos of nothing in particular. “ Do you young wantons, as is always crying out for tea, ever stop to think what it will be in Hell, without even one drop of vater to moisten your lips. And the heat, like ven I do open my oven door ; a’ burning up the soles of

your poor bare feet. Aye, Mees Rose ;" she went on, pointing a denunciatory finger, " an' fizzling the fat of such as you."

" I wish as how you'd not talk so horrid, at breakfast an' all : " protested Rosie ; " you turn my stomach, that you do."

" Talking of fat an' frizzlin' : " said another ; " what price a nice rasher of bacon now, eh girls ? All streaky an' hot."

" Along o' fried bread."

" An' an egg." The original point of the conversation was forgotten, and the whole ward was roused from its apathy by the unfailing delight of picturing the meals, which were possible " outside."

Lu laughed, that rare, clear laugh which still held the note of forest streams. Caught Mrs. Schwartz's sombre and bilious eye, and laughed again.

" I can't help it ; " she said, her eyes swimming with merriment. " I'm not laughing at you, but at the thought o' Rosie—and the bacon and the eggs fizzling together. It minds me of someone I used to know—" she gave a sudden start as the words passed her lips, for they seemed to imply something over and done with ; and the next moment she amended them.

" Someone I know used to say that the funniest thing in life was its incon— in— incon—— There ! if I haven't gone and forgotten the word ; but it meant the same funny sort o' mix-up as fat bacon and Hell."

" It won't be funny when you get there : " said Mrs. Schwartz grimly.

" Oh, I don't know ; most things is funny if you looks at them the right way. An' your Hell does seem a mighty big thing for such as Rosie an' Gladys and the rest of them. Like lighting a bush fire to cook a damper. You—you as is always talking about deadly sin an' eternal damnation. Well, you mean well I know, but you ain't got no sense o' humour. Or that Almighty o' yours neither, if He makes girls like young Gladys there—with the brains of a cheese-mite and the body of a woman—then has a down on them for doing what they don't know no better than to do. For, mind you ! it ain't that they love someone so tremendous they can't give enough."

Lu was sitting up in her bed, her chin on her knees, her wide eyes staring into space ; while her mind worked back along the old tracks Julian had laid down for her : then forward, sensing what he would say or feel. But in the end all of her



thoughts, that she found possible to put it into words, were contained in this :—

“ It’s so—so—— Oh, now I’ve got it, incongruous ! ‘ The funniest thing about this funny world is that it’s so incongruous.’ That’s what he said. And it’s like that with them ; they ain’t big enough, you see. They’ve never not loved very much, and they’ve never not hated very much ; nor wanted anything very much. Nor raged for not getting it. Nor been torn with the pain o’ giving. And Hell—Hell for them ! It ’ud be plumb ridiculous, a’ that’s a fact.”

## CHAPTER XXIV

ON different days, when a minister of any particular denomination happened to come to the hospital, the babies were taken away to be christened.

A Sister would put her head in at the ward door and inquire :—“ Are there any Church of England—or Roman Catholic—or Presbyterian women here ?” as the case might be. Then any girl who held up her hand was asked what name she wished to give her child ; and it was carried off to be received into the faith to which its mother nominally belonged.

For a long time Lu was cynical over the christenings. What would Julian have said to such mummery ? But then she began to feel as if her baby was being slighted. At the time of admittance she had been asked to what faith she belonged and had answered scornfully :—“ To none.” So that there was a blank space on that particular line of the card above her bed, usually occupied by a statement of the patient’s faith.

But now she was a mother it was different. She began to feel her responsibilities. And thus one day, when all the other babies had been christened, and a strange Sister came to inquire with rather an amused air, if there were any Christadelphians in the ward, she put up her hand.

Then came the question of a name. Lu had quite meant to call her boy Julian, or if it had been a girl—now an unthinkable calamity—Julia. But, as suddenly as she decided that her son should join the ranks of the Christadelphians, she decided that he should have a name of his very own : several

rose to her mind—Archie, William, Hector, but none quite suited her fancy.

The Sister, who was in a hurry, grew impatient :—" Come now ! don't be all day making up your mind ! Why not call him George, that's a nice name—George, or Harry." In any other place she would have naturally suggested that the child should be named after his father. But, once a patient had been admitted to the hospital, it was never allowed by those in authority that any baby born there—unless its mother was a married woman—could possibly possess a second parent ; for such an admission would palpably have weakened the force of the inevitable, " you brought it all on yourself."

Then suddenly, as if by an inspiration, the name " David " rose to Lu's mind. She had felt some uncertainty regarding the other names : but now—as was always the case with any idea which cut through her mind in that peculiarly vivid fashion—she had no doubt that David was the only possible name. And David it was—David Tempest.

Suddenly it seemed that Julian Orde had grown very far away. As if by her act, though she and her baby remained one, Julian had been set at a distance, accorded an identity which was quite separate and distinct.

She felt as if she had been disloyal in not giving the child his name. But after all, it was not that she loved Julian less, for she worshipped him in his son : the way the tiny creature scowled, with the same intense concentration that his father had worn in setting some peculiarly ticklish trap ; the domineering gesture of his hands, his mellow cry, was all part of Julian. It was only that she wanted two people in her life : separate and distinct in spite of their likeness.

But for all that she was glad, when the little David was brought back and laid in the cot at her side, to see that his hair was still distinctly red ; and that his gestures, demanding nutriment, were as passionately insistent as they had ever been ; despite his alien name and recent admittance to the Christian fold.

At the end of ten days the ward was emptied, to be stripped and fumigated before another batch of patients should be admitted. The girls—looking unnaturally white, and with all their gaiety gone—sat by the side of their empty beds, on hard straight chairs, till the nurse in charge of the hall came

to tell them that relations or friends, or representatives of some Convalescent or Rescue Home, had called for them. An ominous whisper of "copper" going the round of the remaining girls as poor Mimi's name was called.

Only Lu, who had been kept back by her bout of fever, and another girl who had fainted while she waited, were not allowed to go out, but were rolled in blankets and taken down to another ward; among a fresh lot of staring patients and nurses, very irritated at having outside cases thrust upon them in this fashion.

Number five was a dark ward on the ground floor, against the windows of which the trees brushed with a persistent sibilant whisper. There was a screen round one corner where a girl lay dying; the patients were for the most part older than they had been in number twelve, and Lu was very miserable. The only brightspot in it all being the fact that her temperature kept normal, and if it did not rise again she would be out in three days; also that she was not returning to Mother Alldyce's; for Mrs. Schwartz had invited her to go to her for a week, and promised to come and fetch her, herself, on receipt of a postcard that the Sister of the ward could send. Lu could pay her a little and look round for a place where she might perhaps have the baby with her. It was all very vague, but it meant an escape from this prison and from the sordid indecencies of Mother Alldyce's, with a week of comparative peace. And besides, Lu had liked Mrs. Schwartz; her grimness, her long silences, her fierce scorn of the girls' frothy insouciances reminded her of her own native forests—cruel, and yet in a way, strong, wholesome and primitive.

In some strange fashion Mrs. Schwartz had brought a sense of security and peace to Lu; while she, on her side—though her rigid Calvinistic principles did not allow her to approve of the girl—yet loved her; recognizing in her a force of truth and reality to which she herself was akin. She could never have fallen as those others had fallen, through mere weak sensuality. But she might, though she would never have confessed it, even to herself, have given all for some such passion as animated this girl, who had never even mentioned her lover. True, she still regarded Lu as a brand to be snatched from the furnace; but at the same time she recognized it as a furnace, and not as a flickering taper alluring moths ripe for any flame.

Lu got up for the first time the day before she was to leave the hospital. She was wrapped in an old pink flannelette wrapper—which had been used for so many patients that it smelt horribly human—and sat upon a high chair; directly after breakfast so that her bed might be made before the doctor and matron came their rounds.

Ada, the other girl from number twelve had gone, and the women in the ward were at the stage when they were only allowed to lie flat on their backs. Their faces were coarse and sagged, their eyes dully curious: Lu's getting up was the event of the day, and they stared unblushingly from above the folded edges of their smooth counterpanes.

The pink flannelette wrapper, the indecent apology for a nightgown were miserably inadequate to the girl's slim height. Dress a young silver birch, with the dew of the morning gleaming among its fine, dark tresses, in such a garb: set it in a shambles, and there you have Lu as she appeared that morning.

Six of the women in number five ward were married; and these believed that the title of "Mrs." on the card above their beds, accorded them a licence to talk as they pleased; that the young girls must be dead to all sense of decency, or else they would not be there. These women were saturated with sex, bored to death by the perpetually recurrent bearing of children: their only possible excitement lay in the use of their tongues; and they used them freely, though without malice, on Lu:—"Two yards of pump water," as they called her.

But Lu did not mind, she was up at last, she was almost free: and the first time the ward was empty of nurses she twinkled, what they called "her canary shanks," in a feeble imitation of the grey people's dance.

But it did not last. Her back ached so that it felt like an open wound: the hard seat and rail of the chair eat into her very bones; while in her endeavour to feed David she retched, and was terrified of dropping him. She twisted and writhed hanging over the back of her chair; but it was all no good. She would have given worlds to have lain down in her bed; but the tyranny of the counterpane was greater than ever once a patient was up. The idea of the doctor discovering a female form in a wrapper on the outside of the bed, being horrifying beyond all words.



By this time Lu was on a meat diet. There was boiled rabbit for dinner, with glutinous sauce, covered in that disgusting skin which always accompanies badly cooked rabbit.

The sweat turned cold on the girl's brow : the ward heaved up and down with waves of darkness, picked out in yellow spots ; and suddenly—with a crash—the plate fell to the floor and was smashed. Lu had fainted ; and the date of the post-card, which was already written, had to be put forward yet another day.

"They're always doing that : " grumbled the nurse who helped the girl back to bed. " One thinks one's got rid of them and then this happens. It's too bad ! I was counting on one empty bed, and one baby less to wash ! "

" It's the overfeeding they get, I reckon, missus ; " put in one of the patients with a harsh laugh. " A whole rabbit's head for one poor girl ; they ain't used to such luxury ; it's no wonder they go squiffy like. "

" No, it ain't, an' that's a dead bird ! " agreed another ; and there was a general laugh. But, in spite of all the trouble caused by fainting patients, there was never any question of polluting the sanctity of the counterpane ; or even the addition of a cheap deck-chair to the ward furniture.

The next day, however, Lu was a little stronger ; and setting her teeth determined that she would not allow herself to faint.

Then the day after, she was dressed in her own clothes, which smelt of disinfectant and general mustiness, hanging upon her like a sack ; and sat and waited with David on her knee : feeling it quite impossible to believe that the prison gates were really ajar, that someone was actually coming for her—Lu Tempest, till at ten o'clock the hall nurse entered with a plaid shawl in her hand, and said that Mrs. Schwartz had brought it for the baby ; and would she be quick as there was the dinner to see to.

It was extraordinarily light out of doors. The sun was unnaturally bright, the sky unnaturally high ; so was the ground which seemed to be rising up to meet Lu at every step.

" It ain't not von minute's walk to the tram ! " said Mrs. Schwartz cheerfully, taking the baby and tucking Lu's hand beneath her arm. She had borne six children before and never

lain in bed for as much as a week, so that the days at the hospital had been a period of rest and comparative luxury, and she was feeling particularly well. Better than she had done at any of her former up-gettings ; which, for many minor reasons—to separate quarrelling children, to keep Fritz from setting fire to himself with the matches, and remedy Albert's forgetfulness regarding the scullery tap—had always begun, in a fragmentary way, from the very first day. Besides, she had enjoyed her experience among “them hussies” as she called them ; prophetically sniffing hell fire as an old war-horse might sniff powder : stimulated by the nearness of tangible iniquity.

“It ain't not von step !” she repeated. But it was a good half mile, and Lu was feeling very decidedly “squiffy” again, as she mounted the tram steps, greatly surprised to find that her foot actually touched them.

“Been ill, eh ?” suggested a stout matron, with a curious glance, over a tightly-packed string bag ; first at the girl, who leant back panting, with white face and closed eyes ; then at the baby.

Mrs. Schwartz fixed her with a cold stare :—“I don't know if you are aware, marm, that all your tomatoes is a'squeegin' through your bag onto your knee ; if so you vill excuse my mentioning it, not being von to mind businesses vat is not mine own.”

## CHAPTER XXV

FOR a week Lu battled patiently to obtain a situation where she could have David with her ; never for a moment after the christening did she think of him merely as “baby.” But all the places where a child could be taken were up-country, mostly on farms, and of these she dreaded the very thought ; besides which she could not bring herself to leave town with the prospect of Orde's return within sight. Her beauty, too, in conjunction with the baby, was against her ; for women with sons or husband felt that they did not care to take any risks ; what had happened once might happen again.

All this time the possibilities of touching the money left by Orde did not even enter the girl's head. She had saved a

little at the tea-room, and with this she paid Mrs. Schwartz day by day : for they both belonged to a community where people live only for twenty-four hours at a time.

With immense pride she took David to show to Doctor Barton, who pronounced him a beauty, and Mrs. Platt—drinking tea with her and the “chronic” husband, and the children in the one room, much blocked up by a large chiffonier, loaded with china ornaments, a still larger bed, and a small mattress for the children ; while the family washing hung on strings overhead, cunningly contrived so as to drip only on the small bare portion of floor ; an arrangement which necessitated sitting on the mattress, as the patient in the big bed must not be shaken ; and there was no room on the chiffonier.

It was all a little crowded ; but it was very delightful, and David was duly admired, turned round and round and undressed—a bit at a time—to show his strong, rounded limbs, his wonderful little feet, and dimpled knees.

Mrs. Platt and Mrs. Schwartz were introduced ; and joining forces the two matrons bearded Mother Alldyce in her den : gave her a bit of their mind and took away Lu’s box : not even waiting for a carrier, but bearing it off to the tram between them, flushed with victory.

Once again Lu’s determination grew to that point when it seemed that she must force fate, as she did, before another week was over, by the persistent bombardment of every registry office in the town. The place was not of the sort she wished for, because she could not have David with her ; but it was in Carlton, quite near to Mrs. Schwartz, with whom she could board him, while the promised outings were liberal. Besides, she liked the look of her mistress, who, at first sight appeared little older than herself.

As for Mrs. Ogilvie Buxton she was frankly delighted ; and went home and told her husband that the new girl—though in all probability “she couldn’t cook for nuts”—had the loveliest-looking complexion ; and she had engaged her because she felt she simply must find out what it was done with.

“As long as she don’t skim the kid’s milk and use the cream for her face, I’m sure I don’t mind :” responded Mr. Ogilvie Buxton—who was very easy-going and wore wonderful

socks, with carpet slippers in the house, and always smelt of cigar smoke. For the reason, as had been explained to Lu, why little David could not be received in the house was, not that anyone had any objection to babies, but that there was one there already.

"Though mine's a great, big boy, just on three; you wouldn't believe it to look at me? That's what everyone says. I couldn't believe it myself if it wasn't for remembering he was born the year Orion won the Cup:" volunteered her new mistress. And indeed Lu felt she could not believe it either, till the first time she saw Mrs. Ogilvie in bed in the morning.

At first sight it seemed as if the promise of abundant leisure could scarcely be fulfilled. For there was little Hugh—a solemn, dark-haired child, infinitely older than his parents—to be washed and dressed and cared for; and the cooking and all the work of the little villa to be done.

But gradually things straightened themselves out. It was impossible to cook very much because meals were so uncertain; owing to the fact that both Mr. and Mrs. Ogilvie Buxton were musical light comedy artists, and therefore governed by rehearsals, and the necessity for neither eating nor drinking much before a performance. Besides, Mrs. Ogilvie Buxton usually forgot either to give orders, or to supply Lu with money; which necessitated running out in a great hurry for something tinned; while the principal meal of the day was the supper, which she left ready on the table when she went to bed.

The sight of the dining-room the first thing in the morning—with the bright sunshine streaming into it—was certainly discouraging; the table strewn with dirty plates, cigarette ashes and empty bottles and glasses: the floor a medley of satin slippers, torn letters, scraps of dead flowers, and crumbs. But Lu rose early, grappled with it the first thing; and then "put it away," as she said.

As for the cleaning, everything was so carpeted and draped that scrubbing—save in her own room and the kitchen—was an impossibility; while there must be no noise of any sort in the morning. A state of affairs which led to Lu being allowed, after the house was straightened and the breakfast tray carried to the bedroom, to take little Hugh out in the



public gardens, by then aglow with late marigolds and dahlias ; and call for David and take him too : as long as she was back by twelve, in time to help Mrs. Ogilvie Buxton dress—a proceeding which left the bed, the chairs, even the floor, heaped with discarded garments ; for the little actress was nervous and tired in the morning, when nothing she had seemed to suit her—and prepare a “snack of luncheon,” the only meal which the couple partook of in company with their child ; for whom Lu purchased fish and rabbit, and made soup and rice puddings ; bombarding Mrs. Ogilvie Buxton remorselessly for money to buy these costly luxuries.

“Regular little harpy, ain’t she ? But what’s the odds as long as we’re happy ? There, that’s for the kid :” and he would throw her half-a-crown ; or, even, at times, half a sovereign, which Lu put aside carefully for that special purpose ; absolutely refusing, even at the very end of the week, when things really did get scarce, to “run out and buy a tin o’ salmon ” with as much as tenpence of it.

They liked to have her in the room while they were at lunch ; and question and tease her ; and tell her all their affairs, down to the history of their morning quarrel—which Lu could hear for herself if she happened to be anywhere in the house. They would even knock loudly at her door, when they came home at night, to recount any specially persistent encore ; or describe a new addition to Daisy’s long train of adorers, the length of which seemed a subject of even greater pride to Ogilvie Buxton than to his wife, who Lu got into the way of thinking of by her Christian name, because it was by that that everyone, including her husband, always spoke of her, even to the servant.

“Lu, has Bertie ever tried to kiss you ?” she asked outright at lunch one day. Bertie was engaged in making an orange enact the part of a sea-sick passenger for Hugh’s benefit, and—though the child did not seem greatly amused—Mrs. Ogilvie Buxton was feeling a little out of it.

Lu flushed crimson, at which her mistress’s odd little face wrinkled up into an expression of impish delight, quite free from any real malice.

“Ya—a—a ! I thought as much ! Did it come off, Bert ?” she asked referring to the pink flush on Lu’s cheeks, which had been a great subject of discussion between them.

Buxton grinned. "I didn't get a chance of judging ; but my own cheek was a nice colour by the time she had finished with it ; I can tell you that."

"She has rather big hands. But really you've got lovely ankles, Lu:" remarked Daisy with a kind glance at the girl, who was coaxing Hugh to finish his rice-pudding.

"By Jove ! that she has ; out and outers," declared Ogilvie Buxton.

"How did you see them, I'd like to know ?"

"No need to get shirty, my dear ; I saw them because Lu happened to be on the top of the steps cleaning the windows. She's got saucy little tootsies of her own, too."

"Now don't you' go playing the fool with that girl, my boy ; or I'll——" threatened his wife darkly.

"No fear ! as if I didn't know a straight thing when I saw it. Besides, I don't want a broken jaw. No, thank you, my dear, not for this child."

By this time Hugh had finished his pudding ; and Lu had taken off his bib, folded it, and cleared all the dishes into a tray.

"If you'd please take your feet off the table I could get at the cloth:" she remarked ; bent on business and not taking much notice of what the other two said.

"Listen to her ! That's the sort of duchessy manner as takes ; that 'ud fetch 'em. She ought to go on the stage. She's wasted at this job : if we could only think of something—just a sort of little excuse for a bit of high kicking ; she'd soon be drawing her ten quid a week at Rickard's."

"No, don't you go on the stage, Lu. Men don't respect you any more when once they've seen you in tights ; and the better you look the less they respect you:" said Daisy. She was a little hurt at her husband's remark about knowing when a girl was straight ; though she was too generous even to think of reminding him of David's existence. The next moment, however, her thoughts were diverted ; and drawing Hugh towards her she kissed him : then ran her hand through his thick mop of straight black hair.

"You wouldn't never think my hair used to be the dead spit of this, would you, Lu ? It's wonderful what a bottle or two of perox. will do, though it does take a lot of keeping up, an' no mistake. What are you going off to, now ? You

always seem busy and happy, Lu ; it beats me how you put in your time."

"I've got to wash up, and do your rooms ; and then there's things to make for supper, and the tea to get."

"Regular angel in the home, ain't she ? But by Jove, it's a cruel waste with those ankles !" remarked Bertie patting his own socks admiringly ; and there the conversation ended. But Lu did not forget it. The ship in which Orde had gone to Europe had returned for the fourth time without him ; while she had only heard twice ; receiving a long letter written during the voyage, and a shorter one a fortnight or so after he reached London.

The last arrival of the boat without his name among the passenger list was a terrible blow to the girl, who was desperately anxious to show David, by now the proud possessor of one tooth. And in spite of all her spirit her disappointment was such that she could neither eat nor sleep for several days ; a state of affairs which culminated in a headache so devastating that even Mrs. Ogilvie Buxton noticed it, and ordered her off to her bed ; upon which she lay like a dead thing, inexpressibly thankful for the darkness and quiet : stowing away the cups of weak tea her mistress brought her—slopped into the saucer and swimming with milk—out of sight beneath it ; not wishing to hurt the kind creature's feelings, and knowing well enough that she would never ask for the cups.

It was lucky, however, that she did not quite undress and go to bed ; for she had to get up to find Mr. Ogilvie Buxton's one remaining collar stud for him : then again to help search for Daisy's bunch of curls, which was ultimately discovered caught on to the Medici collar of her evening cloak. And finally to apply a piece of raw gravy beef—bought for Hugh's soup—to his eye, which had come in contact with the fender.

"Lucky he happened to be the rightful owner of it. She wouldn't a' parted with a morsel o' the kid's tucker for me : " declared Bertie pathetically. " But there ! nobody ever does think anything of me."

In this case however, if Lu did not actually think much of her master—whom she regarded as a mere child—she thought a good deal of what he had said in reference to the stage. For, directly her first disappointment at Orde's non-

arrival was over, her back stiffened. It gave her time : when he did come she meant him to be proud of her as well as of David. She did not intend to be a little general servant all her life : she would show him that she was capable of something better than that ; and she remembered the vague plans he had made regarding her dancing, in conjunction with Ogilvie Buxton's words.

Mrs. Buxton remembered too. " Don't you mind what I said about the stage, Lu. Good Lord, everyone has a right to make the best they can of this rotten old world. And on the stage there's always a chance of anything happening : that's what fetches the girls so. But don't you take Bertie too seriously. Bertie's a dear, but it's an odd thing that all the men who are dears are—Oh ! well you know, just dears, and nothing much else. But there, I've got the ' hump ' and everything seems to be going wrong."

Mrs. Ogilvie Buxton was dressing when this conversation took place. Sitting in front of the mirror, dabbing on rouge, and then rubbing it off with a fierce air ; frowning at herself meanwhile.

" My word, but I do look a sight ! How old would you think I was, Lu ?"

" I'm sure I don't know ;" answered the girl, truly enough. For when dressed to go out Daisy looked a bare eighteen ; while in the early morning, pottering about her bedroom, she might have been at least thirty-five ; though, as the painting and powdering, hair-dressing and lacing went on, not only did her years seem to drop from her, but her spirits actually rose, her girlish gaiety and high spirits increased. Indeed for the most part it was only in the early morning that the little woman questioned life ; with peevish fears and misgivings, and vague discontents.

" I'm twenty-five—to-day. No wonder I have the pip ; every birthday all that I want's a rope to hang myself. You'll be a ripper at twenty-five, Lu ; and look at me ! That's the worst of being a blonde." Her voice was tragic, then she laughed. " And after all, I'm not a blonde at all. I wonder what I'd look like if I let my hair go back. But I never could, my skin's gone so dark too. That's the mischief with perox., it gets into your system and plays the deuce with your complexion. It's like that all the way round, there never



seems no stopping anything when once it's started:" she added with a shrug and a light laugh.

Half-way out of the front door she ran back ; looking very pretty in her dark furs, for by then winter was upon them.

"Look here, Lu ! I forgot it was Saturday to-morrow ; there's a Johnny coming to lunch ; a fellow I used to know up in the back blocks : get a tin of something : and some salad." And she tossed the girl half a sovereign, ran down a couple of steps, then turned again.

"Oh, I don't know ; I'm sick of iron-clads ; I believe it's that what upsets my digestion and gives me the hump. I'm sick of everything."

"I'll get some lamb ;" said Lu : thinking of the child ; "and we'll have mint sauce and stewed fruit and cream."

"You're a treasure ; so long ! And look here, don't sit moping indoors all day, bring Hugh along to the rehearsal. It's full dress, an' I've got such a catchy thing on."

Lunch was necessarily early on Saturdays, and when the front bell rang Daisy was only just being "done up," by Lu, in an interval between basting the lamb, and whipping cream for the fruit.

"Heavens ! There's the man. Where's Bertie ?"

"He went out to get a paper, I think ;" muttered Lu, her teeth clenched as she tugged at the band of the cerise gown. "Draw in a little an' don't speak."

Mrs. Ogilvie Buxton drew in, and the anxious moment passed. "Now run down and open the door, and for goodness sake stay and amuse him till I'm ready."

"I can't, the lamb 'll spoil."

"Then send him Hugh to play with ; he's dottled on kids."

Lu thought she had never seen anyone who gave such an impression of size as Martin Brandt :—"The Johnny from the back blocks." He filled up the stuffy little drawing-room to overflowing with his long, loosely made limbs, and rough tweeds, redolent of the country air, even carrying, to the girl's fancy, a whiff of gum leaves and stable.

"Is he there ?" demanded Daisy, as Lu passed into the dining-room with a loaded tray.

"Most of him, I reckon," she replied drily. And, indeed, she could never see Brandt rise from a chair without wondering how much more of him there was going to be ; though he

was curiously neat in his slow movements, like a large careful cat, never knocking anything over, even in the most crowded room.

His hands were immense and very brown, in striking contrast to Bertie's, which were rather podgy, and not always too clean, in spite of the polished nails. His feet were big too ; and so was his laugh, a sudden, rolling laugh, not so much of amusement, as of real pleasure in life. But he did not say much, and most of the conversation fell to Daisy's share.

" You must come and see our show, Tiny— ;" she said, using her own special abbreviation of the big man's Christian name. " Only don't come this afternoon, I always feel rotten at matinées. It's years since you've seen me dance. Do you remember the show in that little pub place up Gippsland way ; and how the stage would tip forward, and how you fellows sat on the floor with your shoulders under one side of it to keep it steady : and how I kicked off your hat !"

" My oath : " said Brandt, grinning.

" I was stiff and sore, too, the wonder is I could dance at all. Three days by coach over the corduroy roads from that place—what's-his-name."

" Bright."

" Bright ! that was it, Bright. My colonial, it was Bright too after we girls had been there a week. By the bye, that's the place Lu comes from, don't you, Lu ?"

Lu, who was handing the potatoes, flushed ; and Bertie putting up his hands made believe to warm them at her face.

" It was a long way from Bright," she said : " up among the Ranges."

Brandt, who had been staring at her, not rudely but with an air of frank admiration, leant forward.

" Do you know the Ranges ? By God, what a country that is. There's room to breathe there. I'd have known you were from the country from your colour."

" There, Bertie ! didn't I say he'd be mashed on her ;" screamed Daisy, delightedly. But Brandt took no notice of her words, his eager grey eyes were fixed on Lu, his lean face glowed.

" Crikey, the fun I used to have moonin' 'possums up along the Ranges when I was a kid ! We were always after a mountain-brown. There were any amount of ring-tails, an'

silver fellows. But we were dead set on the mountain-browns, the old bushmen up there told us of, and cared for nothing else. I never even saw one, though."

"I did once. He was caught in a snare; and he bit my hand and got clean away." Lu's voice held the deep, singing note which was its characteristic in any moment of emotion.

"An' wombat—any amount of wombat; and wallaby, we used to trap them with a sapling——"

"I know; bent down to the ground like this—and with a wire loop, like this." The gesture of the girl's hand was eloquent.

"An' there was one place just at the foot of the Ranges where there were Native Companions—brolga they called them."

"Yes:" said Lu slowly—"there was natives."

"You've seen them too. Well, a chap pretty well gave me the lie because I said I'd seen them up there. What a place it is. By Jove, did you ever see anything like the height of the trees? Are you going back—are your folk there still?"

"No," snapped Lu. She had been bending forward eagerly, her hands on the back of Hugh's chair; but now she jerked herself upright, and began collecting plates and dishes on a tray. "You've gone and got the frill o' your sleeve all messin' in the gravy, Mrs. Buxton:" her voice was sharp.

Half-way across the room she turned, with a movement that was almost savage.

"I ain't got no folk—I don't want them neither."

"What have I done now?" demanded Brandt blankly, after the door had been banged to, by a peculiar quick, backward movement of Lu's foot, which was a perpetual delight to Ogilvie Buxton.

"Hit her on the raw, eh, what?"

"Don't be stupid, Bertie. It's just temper. Lu *has* got a temper, they all have if they're any use."

"I'd hate to offend her, she's got an awful good face."

"Lord!" snapped his hostess: "you men an' your goodness! It must be deadly to look so good, no one ever thinks of offering you any temptations." She added scornfully.

"Daisy!" ejaculated Brandt, for he had never seen his light-hearted little friend in such a mood before.

"Oh, chuck it, Daisy," put in Buxton who was lighting a cigar, straddled in front of the draped fire-place. "What's the good—what's the good of anything ;" he added vaguely :—"what's the odds as long as we're happy ? But why crab Lu ? Lu's all right !"

"I wasn't—I believe I was crabbing myself. Lu—well I don't know that there's anyone I count on as I do on Lu. Heavens, it's a quarter to two. Where's my hat ? I'm awfully sorry to leave you, Tiny, but there it is." She was tying her veil in front of the glass as she spoke, moving her chin to and fro, so as to ease it over her nose."

"Look here ! I tell you what. You'll probably find Lu in the Treasury Gardens—just below the Japanese part—with the kid, after she's finished washing up : you can have another palaver about Gippsland. I never knew you could yapp like that, Tiny, never heard you before. Heavens, how old I look :"

and lifting her veil, she opened her hand-bag and rouged her cheeks afresh ; screwing up her eyes, and moving a little back from the glass so as to get the full effect, then continued :—

"You're right, Lu does look good. And somehow I don't think it would make much difference to her, whatever happened : with some people dirt don't seem to stick, queer ain't it ? Well, so long, don't forget we're all going to dine together."

## CHAPTER XXVI

BRANDT stayed in town for a fortnight ; there wasn't much doing up-country, he declared, and his mate would keep things going. Besides, he had not had a holiday for five years.

Every evening he took Mrs. Ogilvie Buxton out for supper after the play, so that the dining-room now presented no morning terrors for Lu ; brought her chocolates, and gloves and silk stockings ; and was invariably tender and patient with the little woman, who seemed to become each day, more restless and irritable ; though she repented every outburst



the moment it was over, being unceasingly hungry for affection and admiration.

"Though it ain't that he's struck on me:" she remarked one day, referring to Brandt's attentions. "I don't believe he ever even remembers I'm a woman. He's just sorry for me—the Lord only knows why. But he's a sort of collector of poor things; I remember how the chaps used to laugh about him up-country. If there was a horse that was pack-galled; or a dog blind of an eye, Brandt bought him."

Sometimes Bertie made a third at the party; but not often. "He's chasing round after one of Rickard's girls now;" declared his wife, with an assumption of indifference. "My troubles! He'll come back again; I know Bertie's little ways. And that Bella Mackey, of all people! Have you seen her, Tiny?"

"No:" answered Brandt, who at that moment was doubled up on the drawing-room floor playing trains with Hugh: to whom locomotives were the one absorbing interest in life.

"Well, you'd see her if you were within cooee of her. Such a size! I met her down the block the other day, making a procession of one. I wanted to put my tongue out at her: but I didn't. No one can say I don't behave like a lady; whatever other folk do."

Something in her voice must have touched Hugh's heart: for springing to his feet he ran to his mother, and hugged her violently: "You're a boster," he declared; "and I love you, and Lu and the cat."

"It's a pity you don't live in the country, Daisy. You're getting fagged out with this life. There's no give back in the town, it's all paying out:" remarked Brandt.

"No, thank you! Me in the country! Why, I get hippped enough as it is. Lu's the one for that graft—you'd better talk it over with Lu, Tiny." Daisy's voice was light enough, but there was a wistful look in her eyes. She was very fond of the girl. Besides, she wanted someone near her to be happy; that she might be able to believe in it again.

"Do you think she would?"

"What do you mean? the slap up thing, parson and ring and all that?"

"Of course, what else could I mean? Daisy, do you think she would?"

"Oh, I can't say, it all depends. You know—you know about——" Mrs. Ogilvie Buxton hesitated, and Brandt flushed crimson through his tan.

"Yes I know—all I *want* to know. And it doesn't make any difference:" he answered, for on that very first day when he had found her in the Treasury Gardens, Lu had David on her knee—his bright eyes peering out from the pent-house of a shawl—and had regarded him gravely.

"That's a jolly little nipper, whose is that?" and he extended a big forefinger which the baby immediately clasped and endeavoured to draw to his mouth.

"He's mine," said Lu.

"I didn't think you were married."

"Neither I am:" Lu's chin was in the air, her green eyes blazed the old defiance; and it was then that Brandt said and did the thing that made her his friend for life.

"I'm not much of a hand at nursing kids: but do you think that he'd come to me?" and he held out his arms: whistling alluringly. "My oath, ain't he like a squirrel? The red hair of him, and those cute brown eyes."

Day after day when he was not making existence as pleasant as possible for little Mrs. Ogilvie Buxton, Brandt haunted the public gardens, striding through them with alert eyes and unwavering purpose till he found what he sought—Lu, on a sunny bench with the children; or walking briskly round the paths to keep warm, Hugh trotting at her side, and David, held astride upon her hip. Then, attaching himself to the little party, he would talk of the country they both knew; of the wild animals and the life there; endless discussions out of which—though he never held forth on the subject of his own feelings or achievements—Brandt's own character gradually unfolded itself. For it was only by way of a simile to Lu's childhood that he told her of his own hard life as a small boy; when he had milked his dozen cows, morning and evening, and trudged five miles to school, to fall asleep with his head on the desk.

Gradually in the intervals of silence—for Lu was never a great talker—Brandt's personal life unfolded itself. The never-ceasing fear of drought; the bad seasons, the struggle

and disappointment. And, then, the death of his widowed mother—the one element of tenderness his life had ever known—just at the time when he believed that he had at last conquered fate ; achieving a well-stocked farm in a habitable district, with neighbours of her own sex, a before unknown luxury.

As the pleasant drawling voice went on—with its detached reminiscences, its simple and matter-of-fact account of the ceaseless struggle to win Nature over to his side—the man's quiet, indomitable courage, his clean outlook on life, his primitive, clear-cut ideas of right and wrong became evident.

For months Lu had been living among people whose talk apart from the engrossing question of clothes, was mainly of the opposite sex—with Daisy it was always a "chap" with Bertie "a girl," or "a little bit of fluff," as he expressed it.

But Brandt's talk was of his work, of Nature, or of other men :—" I and my mate," or " I and another chap." If he spoke of women at all, it was with a sort of awkward reverence. The story of a fight at some bush hotel—not told for its own sake, but because of something of which it was the climax or prefix ; the overreaching of cockies, or squatters : scenes up at the diggings. It was always : " But you women couldn't understand that—don't know what beasts men get to be when they are all herded together, away from anything decent ; and thank God you don't."

" You believe in women and in God ?" remarked Lu one day. Her voice was hard ; she spoke with a reckless little laugh, almost hating Brandt for being so different from other men she knew : " pi," as she expressed it scornfully to herself.

" Well, of course I do—" the man's honest face was a little puzzled :—" I don't believe in chapel an' all that, but I can't see how a fellow can live out among the mountains, and not believe that there's Something—Someone. As for women—well there was my mother ; and now you, with this little chap." And he extended his finger to David, with a vague picture of the Madonna and Child floating through the mind.

Lu rose with a jerk and flung the baby astride her hip :—

'Well, there wouldn't be any little chap if we were all the angels you think us. We women have got to pay through the nose for all we ever get. Women !"—like a flood some of the talk she had heard at the hospital came rushing back upon her:—"Women ! let me tell you this, Mister Brandt, women know a sight more about men than ever they know about themselves. Now then, Hugh, come along ; there's all my work waiting for me ; I've wasted time enough yapping here as it is."

But Brandt was not to be so easily turned from his purpose. After another week he asked the girl to marry him : and on being repulsed—with a sharpness which was the outcome of Lu's desire to put her head down on his shoulder and cry her heart out, just for the mere comfort of the thing—made friends with Mrs. Platt and Mrs. Schwartz ; with whom he had long secret confabs ; arranging that he should be drawn upon for anything either Lu or the boy appeared to need, and sent for at once in any emergency.

He even sought out Miss Mack—who fell immediately and ardently in love with him ; and Doctor Barton, on the ludicrous plea of ill-health ; determined to leave Lu bulwarked round with friends.

Then, all his arrangements completed, he departed up-country with undiminished cheerfulness ; leaving the girl somewhat hurt by his apparent unconcern.

"You're a softy, Lu !" remarked Daisy as she returned from seeing him off : "he's got a topping little farm, and he's a white man, is Tiny."

"He and his farm :" retorted Lu, who was making Daisy's bed, turning the mattress with a slam and beating up the pillows savagely.

"Well, there's the kid to think of."

"Do I ever think of anything else ?—Is there anything the kid ever wants for, tell me that ! I'd like to see my David on a farm ; ground down till he don't know that he's alive. Milking his ten or twelve cows afore he can scarce reach their udders, like Brandt himself. And you and Hugh ? What do you fancy you're going to do if I get married, tell me that."

"You think you own the earth, you do :" protested Daisy rather huffily.



"Well!" snapped Lu: "if you don't like me get another girl. But you ain't going to rope me into marrying any man."

"It's the only way of being sure of them; and I say it for your good."

"Who wants to be sure?" retorted Lu. And there the matter ended; while she imagined that Brandt could be forgotten. But he was not, and never could be; for he had provoked the very first comparison of Orde with any other man. Orde, who—up to this time—had occupied the place of an incomparable divinity; and that, if nothing else, would have kept his memory alive; though with much the same irritating effect as a hair shirt.

## CHAPTER XXVII

THE winter wore towards its end. Already the gardens were aflame with tulips—vivid patches of them in the beds, and running like gay ribands along the borders; while Daisy was consumed by a devouring passion for new clothes, and kept a woman constantly employed sewing in the dining-room; amidst a mass of materials as brilliant as the tulips themselves, which never seemed to turn out quite in the style indicated by the fashion papers which inspired them.

The seamstress worked with the windows shut, and covered the carpet with threads; while Daisy usually brought one, or more, of her admirers back to supper—for Bertie's hours were becoming more and more erratic—so that the very thought of the dining-room in the morning grew to be a nightmare to Lu.

Hugh was ailing and cross; for people would stuff him with chocolates, while the hard, hot spring sun, and cold, dust-laden south winds were trying to everybody. Indeed, Lu could scarcely believe that it was the same season which had brought the indescribably, almost painfully lovely days she remembered in the forest.

Added to all this, David was teething, with the fiercely resentful spirit in which he submitted to, or rather fought against, all the ills of life: as long as she lived Lu could never forget his fury over the miserable business of weaning. Mrs.

Schwartz's baby was teething too ; and, phlegmatic person though she was, her nerves became fretted to such an extent by the two children—and by some vague pain from which she appeared to suffer, and which was always associated with Herr Schwartz and one of his drinking bouts—that she shook David in Lu's presence one day, just as she would have shaken her own child, calling it a " misbegotten little brat."

White with fury Lu bore the child off to Mrs. Platt ; but he cried with one hard continuous cry all night ; so that the " chronic " husband was irritated beyond endurance ; and next morning Mrs. Platt appeared in tears, with David in her arms, to suggest that he should be made a ward of the State and sent into some Home.

At her wit's end Lu offered a week's pay to Mrs. Ogilvie Buxton in lieu of notice, and packed up her belongings ; determined to get a place where she could have the child. Though ultimately it was decided that she should stay in the house and keep David with her while Mrs. Buxton " looked round " : a proceeding carried out in such a half-hearted manner—for David seemed to have screamed away the worst of his teething troubles—that nothing came of it ; and another baby in the household, from which Buxton was now so often absent, began to be taken as a matter of course.

During the short encounter with Mrs. Schwartz there had been too much said on both sides to allow of any festering sore ; and, as life settled down again into the ordinary routine, David was often taken to spend the afternoon at his old home ; particularly when Lu wanted to see any new rehearsal, as she made a business-like practice of doing.

Already the Cup week play was being prepared ; and Daisy, in a larger part than usual, was feverishly excited ; appealing for approbation and admiration to anyone who could find time to listen to her.

At the third rehearsal Lu sat in the stalls, from which she turned back a fold of the holland cover, for she adored the feeling of the plush seats. Different satellites of the theatre had told her again and again she had no business in the place at all, let alone the stalls ; but she took no notice of them whatever.

On this particular day, however, the manager himself came down and told her she must not sit there.

"Why?" demanded the girl, her cool green eyes full on him; at which he laughed, for there was really no reason at all, and shifted his ground.

"Whose kid's that?"

"Daisy Ogilvie Buxton's."

"Is he going to be an actor?"

"No—he's going to be a man."

"Gad! you've got a nerve! What's your name?"

"Lu Tempest."

"Well, Lu, do you know you're a devilish attractive young woman." The girl, who was tired, sat sideways in her seat, one leg hooked over the arm; and Mr. Hawkins' eye was on the slim ankle and small foot that Bertie had admired.

"I've not paid to sit here, and you're not paid to guy me; so I reckon we're quits."

"Are you going to take to the stage?" Hawkins asked the question more as an excuse for lingering than anything else; for he was surfeited with toadyism, and the girl's audacity attracted him.

"Yes." The answer was so unexpected, yet so confident, that the manager laughed. "In what rôle, may I ask?"

"What's that?"

"Well, what sort of parts do you want to take?"

"I'm going to be a dancer." As she spoke Lu rose and stretched herself, while the man's eye followed her with a professional admiration and keenness. Few movements could have shown her off to better advantage, but the girl was not clever enough to realize this; indeed to the very end of her career Lu never was clever in that sort of way: any feminine wiles she mastered being the outcome of observation and mimicry. She merely knew what she wanted, and went for it, much as Brandt did. She felt the spirit of the bush and she expressed it; she loved beauty of movement, line, form and rhythm; but it was for their own sake that she loved them, and—here was a lower motive—for their pecuniary value; never as a lure to the opposite sex.

"There's that old Johnny with the stick beckoning to you."

Hawkins glanced impatiently at the conductor, and the rows of chorus girls, who stood staring awkwardly, because no one had told them what to do next.

"Damn the fellow with the stick! Look here, will you go

up there and show me, and those gawks of girls, what's your idea of dancing."

"No, I won't."

"Shy, eh?"

"No, I don't care to be made a fool of, that's all."

"Will you come and see me alone, and show me—tell me what you can do, what you want?"

"A'right." Suddenly Lu's heart leapt to her throat. Here at last was her chance. Her cheeks flamed and her eyes glowed at the thought.

Mr. Hawkins took out his engagement book and flicked over the pages. Suddenly he had ceased to be an easy-going connoisseur of pretty girls, and was merely the business man.

"Friday—five o'clock, here after the rehearsal.

"Right you are."

"I suppose you'll be giving me the mitten now:" lamented Lu's mistress gloomily when she was told of the appointment.

"'Tain't likely; if he does take me on do you think it's going to fill up all my time? You leave the work to me, an' I'll pay Mrs. Platt to mind the children while I'm at the theatre."

Mrs. Ogilvie Buxton stared. "Well, I'm blest! If you haven't got it all thought out, an' no mistake. Look here, Lu! Don't think I'm not glad; I am as glad as glad, though I do always seem to think of myself first, it's a sort of habit. I'll lend you my patent leathers with the buckles when you go to see Hawky, if you can get into 'em. But you be careful, my dear. He's a jammy dog, is Hawky, when he pleases, an' a fair terror with women; the girls are always talking of it. If they turn him down he's narked, and they get no chance afterwards—you see he's got a strong billet, part-owner as well as manager. Then if they do go week-ending with him, he gets sick of the very sight of them."

"My trouble! You an' your push are always thinking of one thing, and only one thing."

"Well, my dear, we've got to live. All the jobs are in the men's hands, after all, worse luck!"

"I tell you what I'm going to do. I'm going to dance so that Hawkins can't do without me;" and Lu swung herself from side to side on her tip-toes, her hands at her hips. "I'm



going to dance over all their heads. To dance, and dance, and dance ; an' to live by my job : an' that's all."

But despite her nonchalance the next three days were passed in a state of feverish anxiety. So much depended on Mr. Hawkins' decision—her own life and David's, and the light in which Julian would see them on his return.

## CHAPTER XXVIII

ON the auspicious Friday Lu arrived before her time at the theatre, slipping in past the door-keeper who, after one wordy battle, always pretended not to notice her. It was a warm day, but she felt cold and a little light-headed ; while her mind, refusing to speculate on the immediate future, persistently travelled back to that period of starvation in the forest, before Orde's first coming : there was the same curious feeling of emptiness ; the same desire to laugh and cry at the same time.

But as she sat in the dark stalls, and watched the rehearsal her courage grew. There was so little spring or vitality in the girls, apart from the chief performers. Their expressions were vacant or sullen. Hawkins was in a vile mood. Even Miss Avory the pretty ballet mistress, whose own movements were so graceful, came in for a share of the general vituperation for not handling her team better. Again and again the few fiddles and the piano, all the orchestra in use at the first rehearsals, were sent back to repeat a passage.

" Play that bit again—play it again, do you hear ? Now Miss Tankerville. Good God ! do you call that dancing—you've got to look arch—you've got to look as if you expected someone to kiss you. It's a play remember, it's got nothing to do with real life !"

" Now look"—and he pointed a denunciatory finger—" Look at that chorus ! If it's not trespassing too much on your valuable time, Miss Avory, I'll trouble you to look at that chorus. My oath ! if those girls can't smile better than that they'd better go and be mutes at a funeral. Smile ! Do you hear ? Smile—damn you, smile !" And scowling with rage, he marched up and down the rows of girls, several

of whom were in tears ; thrusting his face close to theirs ; savagely scornful of the fixed, inane grin with which some of them obeyed his commands.

Daisy, already nerve-racked to the uttermost—for Bertie had announced at lunch-time that he had joined another company, and was starting for Sydney in a couple of days—was on the verge of hysterics. Actors, actresses, scene-shifters, carpenters, musicians, they were all involved ; and the rehearsal ended in a whirlwind : the men gathering in the flies muttering and scowling ; the girls huddling away to their dressing-rooms, limp with fatigue and depression. The principal lady having donned her furs, before it was half over, and sailed off to her motor-car, declaring that Hawkins might whistle for her if he liked.

Through it all Lu watched the manager as a cat watches a mouse. It was Friday : he had said Friday, and she didn't mean to miss her chance, for all his moods.

The theatre emptied. The electric-light men began to turn out the lights : glanced in the direction of Hawkins, who was seated with his secretary at a little table in the middle of the stage, shrugged their shoulders ; left a cluster burning near him, and departed.

" You'll get locked in, miss : " said one as he passed out through the stalls.

" I have an appointment with Mr. Hawkins : " replied Lu grandly.

" Well, I don't envy you ! " retorted the man ; then moved on grinning, as the girl rose to her feet, and passing to the right, found her way through a maze of scenery, on to the stage. There planted herself in front of the manager, who glanced up sharply as she addressed him by name.

" What are you doing here ? I've no time to be bothered now. I'm fed up with the lot of you. "

" You said Friday, after the rehearsal. "

" Go to hell. "

But Lu stood her ground. Though she made no answer, simply because none seemed required of her.

Presently the secretary, who had evidently come to the end of his work—and sat tipping back his chair—stretched out a long leg ; touched her foot with his, and winked in the direction of the manager's bent head ; then jerked

his thumb towards the flies. But Lu refused to take the hint.

"You said Friday:" she repeated loudly; feeling that it was time some move was made.

Hawkins tipped back on his chair, lit a cigarette and stared at her. "An' who—in the name of all that's holy—are you?" he demanded fretfully.

"Lu."

"Sort o' 'linger longer Lucy' push:" tittered the secretary. But his chief took no notice of what he said. His eyes were on the girl, and suddenly he remembered.

"Oh, you're the cock-sure young party that wants to go on the stage, and say you can dance. Did you see the pretty little exhibition this afternoon? Yes! Then what did you think of it?"

"Well, I didn't think much of it."

"And you imagine you could do better, eh? You've got a blanky nerve, and no mistake."

"I don't know as I could do better, but I could do different."

"What can you do?"

"Well, up in the bush I used to do the native-companions, and the cockatoos, an' the wagtails."

"What—imitate them?"

"Yes."

"It doesn't sound very exciting; but go on—show me. Do you want music?"

"There was something that went like this:" and Lu began to hum a well-remembered fragment from "Massa is away"; not in tune, having only heard it from Orde, but in such perfect time that the secretary caught it up.

"I know that thing," he said; and climbing down into the orchestra began picking it out, briskly enough, with his two forefingers upon the piano.

"Put that table a bit more to one side." Lu issued the command vaguely; for the clumsily manipulated little tune had taken her back to the morning at the foot of the Ranges, when she had first seen the grey birds dance.

"Tum—tum—tum a tum, tum tum." The monotonous thing, the same two or three bars repeated over and over again, went on; while the two men watched Lu curiously. Her body was swaying a little from side to side; but, though

she did not appear in the least embarrassed, she was not attempting to dance. As calmly as in the old days she was settling herself into the atmosphere of the scene she wished to reproduce.

The manager threw aside the end of his cigarette ; took out a pipe, filled and lighted it.

"Tum a tum—tum a tum, tum," went on the man at the piano, with a new sharpness in his touch, for he was getting irritated.

"Buck up !" he muttered, but Lu did not even hear him : the smell of the tobacco was enough, for by an odd chance it was the same sort that Orde had used. And with a sudden movement she kicked off Daisy's shoes—which were a world too large for her—and sprang forward, her shoulders high, her elbows close to her side, in a moment so grotesquely awkward that the man at the piano broke into a loud guffaw.

But the manager did not laugh. Here at least was something new—and that was what people demanded ; not grace, or beauty, but variety.

"Quicker, quicker," nodded the girl. At which the secretary's two stumpy forefingers flew up and down the piano, in a medley of wrong notes ; while he watched her open-mouthed. For the bowing and posturing was at an end ; Lu's arms were spread like fluttering wings ; and she moved faster and faster, with that curious high movement of the knees, that straight fling out of the lower leg, so characteristic of the birds themselves. Faster and faster, till all actual mimicry was lost in a swirl of movement.

Then, with a sudden drop to immobility, the girl was a bird again ; standing with one leg doubled under her ; her arms flat at her sides ; her neck craned up ; her head drooping ; her eyes slanting sideways.

"Good ! good ! good !" shrieked the musician, banging with his fists on the piano.

The manager rammed his hat more firmly on to the back of his head ; moved over to Lu, coolly lifted her skirt and observed the way in which her leg was bent back flat ; so as not to show any angle of knee :—

"None so dusty !" he remarked. Then jerked his head in the direction of the pianist.

"Take her name and address. She can join straight away



in the chorus : thirty bob a week and costume : we shall see how she shapes : rehearsal Monday, two sharp !”

“ I can do other things too—cockatoos an’ what not ;” volunteered Lu, flushed with victory.

“ Well you won’t have a chance to do anything for a month or two, except keep smiling :” retorted Hawkins.

“ Come along, Linger-Long ;” said the secretary, scrambling back over the wire of the footlights : “ and let’s get your little lot signed up. And then,” he added, as the manager moved away without another word—“ then what do you say to tea at Lucas’. Just to celebrate the occasion, eh ?”

It was not much of an invitation, but it was the first fruits of Lu’s stage career : besides, it meant something ; for Mr. Barnes was a toady, and would not offer sixpennyworth of tea to any girl whom he did not think worth cultivating.

### PART III



## CHAPTER XXIX

"DID you see him, Lu ? He was in the front row of the stalls again, to the right ? There was an old woman and two girls. But they didn't belong to him."

"Who ?" Lu's straight black brows almost met as she leant forward and stared into the glass, with an intense concentration that was too detached for vanity ; picked up a piece of cotton-wool and rubbed it over either cheek ; then, with a blue pencil, intensified the shadow beneath her full lower lip.

"The man that sent me the opal bracelet. A big, fair chap with broad shoulders : a real slap-up swell, looks like a new chum."

"They all look the same, those big, fair, new chum men, about as much alive as scalded pigs. I didn't see anyone this first scene, except a fat old lady in the stalls who wouldn't laugh." Lu twisted round as she spoke, and peered over her shoulder at the maid who was fixing her grey wings, for this night she was in her favourite part, her slim person habited in silver grey tights, with a short full skirt of grey tulle, and little corslet bodice of close set feathers : then turned again to the glass—standing with one long leg very straight, the other bent at the knee with raised heel—and patted the smooth coils of black hair, which were wound tightly round her head. Hawkins had wanted her to wear a feather head-dress, but she had absolutely refused. It was the spirit of the grey birds she aimed at ; nay more, the spirit of the wilds, not a mere slavish imitation : Cheiko gave that, with a deliberate care which, as he well knew, rendered his performance irresistibly comic.

"Daisy thinks of nothing but boys ;" put in another girl, who had cleared a place for herself in a corner of a divan, and



sat curled up among a mist of rose coloured draperies :—  
“ It don’t pay, the more you think of the boys the less they think of you.”

“ This ain’t a boy : he’s a man, thirty or thirty-five at least.”

“ Spoon fed like an overgrown baby :” scoffed the girl in pink. “ They’re all pappy, those English Johnnies. I know his name, Inge—Herbert Inge, beautiful, bountiful Bertie.”

“ Inge—” Lu turned round with a perplexed face : “ how do I know that name ? Oh yes ! Why, that man must be oozing money ; it’s he who sent me the emeralds from Dawson’s.”

“ Emeralds !” There was a sudden sharp note in Daisy’s voice. “ Well you are deep Lu Tempest. You never even showed them to me. Why, they’re worth ever so much more than opals. Whatever have you done with them ?”

“ Sent ’em back. Look there, Mary, you’ve got the right wing higher than the other, it’s all hooked up into the wrong loops.”

“ I’m very sorry, miss.”

“ Very sorry, miss ! One ’ud think you were at a funeral ; what’s the matter, got a headache again ? Well, you take yourself off home to bed ; and stop drinking stewed tea and thinking of ‘ him ’ ; and it’s ten to one you’ll stop having headaches.”

“ I’ll stay and tidy up, miss.”

“ No, you won’t, you clear away out of this. An’ for goodness sake don’t come here on Monday looking as if you’d been buried and dug up again, and it was all my fault.”

“ Is there anything really wrong with her, Miss Tempest ?” asked the girl in pink, as the door closed behind Lu’s dresser. “ I never saw anyone look so down in the dumps.”

“ Wrong with her ? No. If there was she’d soon find she couldn’t afford to look that way. They’re all alike, those sewing girls and dressers ; they take no exercise—get their tummies all mixed up with their heart.” And Lu sat down, one leg over her knee, smoothing her silk clad ankle, before slipping on her shoes and adjusting the sandal.

“ But what did he say when you sent him back the emeralds ?” broke in Daisy.

"Who—the man? Well I didn't give him the chance to say much. I sent them back to Dawson's."

"What, sold them?"

"What else should I do. I didn't want to wear them, and it was pretty obvious he didn't know what to do with his money."

"You're real mean, Lu."

"I'm not mean, because I know what money is—what it means, the power of it; and what a sneak one feels when one hasn't got any, and anyone can walk over you. I banked it all for the kids. It 'ud be put to a better use than ever he'd put it to. The men and their money! Let 'em pay: an' pay, an' pay; it's only money they do pay with—it's women's hearts and souls if they're fools enough to trust 'em."

"Well, you needn't get mad about it:" protested Daisy.

"You make me mad. Mean—if I was as mean, as ever I knew how, I wouldn't 'do' meaner than the likes of him 'thinks.' A man who looks like cold ham, sweating jewels! Let them spend their money, and give them nothing for it; you'll never make up for all the girls they've got the better of."

"You never care for anybody," said the girl in pink, rising and gathering her draperies around her with a little shiver.

"Then, there's your salary, you get enough for all you can ever want: it's easy enough for you to keep straight—to be good."

"To keep straight!" Lu rose, and gave her wings a little shake as she drew herself upright in front of the long triple mirror; swinging to and fro on her toes, as though she delighted in the mere fact of her own balance and suppleness.

"Don't make any mistake, my dear: keeping straight's no matter of being good—no virtue. It's one of two things, with most of us: either having all we want, or just hating being pawed about. And such men! Pheugh! It's easy enough stepping over a gutter when you come to it: but there's rivers and seas—and then where are we?" For a moment the girl ceased to sway and poise; her body dropped into its old lines of weariness, and the pupils of her eyes dilated darkly as she gazed into the glass, confronted by a sudden mental picture of herself, in the forest, away among

the Ranges : burning with a passion of surrender and adoration.

Then with a jerk, she turned round upon the other two :—  
“ You’ve no business here, Letty, get a move on you, clear out. And you Daisy, you’d better go and finish dressing.”

Mrs. Ogilvie Buxton shrugged her shoulders :—“ A dressing-room of your own, an’ turning up your nose at emeralds. It’s a queer world ; who’d think you’d ever been a little general servant ? I believe you forget it yourself at times, my dear.”

“ I forget nothing !” snapped Lu :—“ Nothing ! Unless it’s things where I was a soppy failure ; an’ wasn’t I a good slavey ? Tell me that, now. Better than you’ll ever be at anything, an’ that’s a dead bird ! Who’s there ? Oh, come in, Cheiko.”

“ Time’s pretty well up, Miss Tempest, they’ll be calling you in a brace o’ shakes :” said a voice through the crack of the door ; followed by a man’s squat figure, attired in a cockatoo’s plumage ; with grotesque bandy legs and immense feet, which plainly owed nothing to art, while a be-feathered head-dress and beak was held beneath his arm.

“ You are ready ?” Utterly oblivious of the other two women, Cheiko’s small bright eyes rested on Lu with a look of complete devotion ; as well they might, for she had come across the little man taking a minor part in a freak show with a travelling circus—his whimsicalities being less impressive than the charms of the fat lady ; and given Hawkins no peace till he had been engaged, and taught certain parts in her own repertoire ; for which, from the first moment, she realized him to be so perfectly fitted.

“ You are lovelier than ever.” He half hopped, half ambled across the room ; and now stood gazing, his head on one side.

“ Every night I’m lovelier than ever ;” laughed Lu. “ Something’s bound to happen soon.”

“ If I wasn’t such an ugly little devil I’d make you love me ;” declared Cheiko : then sighed :—“ But if I wasn’t such an ugly little devil the devil only knows how I’d get a living :” and he laughed ; though his bird-like eyes looked suspiciously moist.

Daisy laughed too, but over shrilly. “ Fancy Cheiko doing the lover, what a dream !”

"With you, my dear, it would be a nightmare:" retorted the object of her derision. But Lu had seen him wince at the words, and leaning lightly towards him kissed him on the forehead.

"Well! Now you can dream that you are the only man in Melbourne that I've ever kissed; then you'll dream true:" she said, and hooked her arm through his as the call-boy tapped at the door.

"Come along, old heart o' gold, an' we'll make them sit up."

Half timidly Daisy touched her arm as they passed—"I'm sorry, Lu."

"A'right, I don't mind; only keep your tongue out of brine when you're talking of my friends." And with light feet Lu dodged in among the medley of planks and pulleys, canvasses, ladders and perspiring men: stood for a moment in the wings, swaying to and fro in time to the music, her cool eyes ranging: nodded to Hawkins at the opposite side, stared at the fat be-jewelled stranger who stood by him. Then—as the piccolos took up the refrain, with a liquid melody, like a brook over a pebbly bottom, in a series of lilting, calling notes—she gathered herself together, with a little shudder that was all pure, never failing rapture, and sprang forward upon the stage.

It was seven years since Hawkins had first engaged her to smile. Seven years since Mr. Barnes had celebrated the occasion by a tea at Lucas': six years and six months since her first solo part, with a touring company up at Ballarat. Six years since the miners at Walhalla had carried her shoulder high round the town, which then boasted as many hotels as it did houses, presenting her with gold-dust and nuggets screwed up in wisps of newspaper—in place of bouquets: after which Mr. Barnes had proposed to her, scenting future success as a vulture scents carrion.

Five years and three months since her first great triumph in Melbourne, where she had been put on tentatively during the slack, after Christmas season. Followed by equal triumph, in Brisbane, Sydney, Perth, and even Adelaide—the holy city. After which European agents had begun to nibble; opening their mouths so wide that at last Hawkins himself, in terror of losing the girl, had asked her to marry him.



But Lu had refused all these tempting offers, first the European agents, though never quite conclusively, so that by also refusing the offer of her manager's heart and hand, she had been able to steadily raise her prices; till Hawkins went in horrible dread of a national disaster, even a drought, which by diminishing the influx of money would check the outflow, and send the girl pirouetting off to Europe.

"Something must happen!" he had got into the habit of saying; at times almost hoping that Lu would break one of those long, uncannily active legs of hers; and thus, at the same time, stop the constant strain which her large salary made upon the profits, and be prevented from passing over to any rival manager. Adding; "It can't go on for ever, people will get tired of it."

But still it did go on. There were certain patrons of the stalls, who imagined that they dismissed Lu, once and for all with the adjective "common." But in this they were so obviously wrong that their opinion held no weight.

It was the very fact that she was so "un-common"; that she refused to be moulded to any set standard, which gave Lu her power; for she neither plastered her person with jewellery; nor shut up her soul in a gilded cage of gentility—that precarious, flimsy fabric by which young persons of the chorus are beginning to set such store.

Indeed she outraged all preconceived notions of the manner and morals of the ballet girl. There was no thin refinement, or scented vulgarity about Lu, who had retained all her old love for soap and water. Some people declared that she was outrageously coarse; but no one could say that she was suggestive. She was a child of the soil, of the people: and the people loved her for it; while, after all, as Hawkins well knew, it was the pit, the gallery and the upper circle that kept the theatre going. If the gods had not approved Lu would not have survived for a month in her own country.

As it was she was known, through the length and breadth of the continent, as "Lu"—or "Linger-longer-Lucy:" and in Melbourne as "our Lu," by every little factory girl and office boy; by every up-country rouse-about, bullock-puncher, or miner with a cheque to "lamb down." Though

she would not take their money and sent back their presents. Laughed at them, bullied them and scolded as she had once done little Win and Harold, and now—to a lesser degree—David.

These were her own sort : they went scot free. During her early touring days Lu had learnt to know these countrymen. Learnt that they were not all like Jake and the others at the farm, which one was of the worst specimens of the festering sores that corrupt the dairying districts.

Even at their very worst they were not so bad : stupidly, and rather piteously, struggling in the trough of their passions ; yet holding by their friends, taking drought, bad seasons, sickness and utter isolation, all as a part of the day's work.

But on the waster, the idler, the remittance-man she had no mercy. She bled them with a savage joy in the fact that she gave nothing in return ; unerringly sure of the spell of her own beauty and individuality. For it was only the women in the stalls that disapproved ; the men were all alike stirred by something different, something even beyond that body, which they could not capture.

Outwardly the girl had hardened ; there was a metallic quality in her beauty and coolness. Men who realized David's existence—as they could not help doing, for Lu was seldom seen outside the theatre without him—and began by imagining that victory would be easy, ended by declaring that she was sexless : heartless, cold as ice. Though they still went on besieging her with expensive presents, with every sort of luxury ; and at last, finding all else in vain, with offers of marriage. Each newcomer believing that he would be the one to succeed where others had failed.

But in some ways Lu was strangely limited. Her affections were steadfast, but they were few ; while she loved David with an intensity which afforded her all the warmth she needed in life. David was part of herself, the dearer part because of his likeness to Orde. They thought the same way, looked at everything in the same way. David was the only one who never wearied or disgusted her : of whose presence she was always conscious but never tired. She kept her old love of loneliness, of wide open space, but the child's nearness never interrupted her sense of freedom : and on Sundays they would

go off for the day ; along the cliffs from Beaumauris, among the mysterious windings of the ti-tree : or away to the Black Spur, camping and picnicking in the forest.

Hugh was often with them ; but though he was only second to David in her affections, Lu found herself consciously remembering and considering him ; he did not come naturally as did her own boy. Though she was all the more careful of him and his feelings ; devoting herself to him ; passionately repentant at the hint of any pain or hurt in his dark eyes. For Hugh was easily hurt. Nothing hurt David ; what he did not like he fought against ; but then he was as sure of his mother's love as he was of the earth beneath his feet ; and faced her enemies with his own.

Lu remembered him standing up to Hawkins, in the days when he still dared to bully her, and David was not yet out of petticoats.

"Don't you ever dare to speak to my mother like that !" he had stormed, crimson to his crest of red hair. And then kicked the great man on the shins, with a small sandalled foot.

He was very broad-chested and upright. His brown eyes were bright and hard, and, in moments of passion, held red lights like his father's. But even in babyhood he was far more consistent than Orde : and less pliable ; with a most disconcerting memory.

"He's a limb of Satan, and no mistake !" declared Mrs. Platt one day, after David, refusing to bend to her will, had declared that :—"Me and my mother, we are the boss of this house." For by the time David was three years old the "chronic" husband had died, the last of the children had been put into a situation, and the old charwoman had taken over the management of the Ogilvie Buxton establishment ; with which Lu had grappled early and late, in the intervals of acting, practising dancing, and rehearsing for nearly two years.

It was a shrunken household ; oppressed with that drab quietness and sense of loss which pervades a manless home : for Bertie had toured from Sydney to Europe, from Europe to America ; was, indeed, still touring, his matrimonial arrangements varying with every country in which he found himself.

"I knew that married people were always splitting up:" Daisy had remarked ingenuously when he ceased even to write. "But I thought as we wasn't really married, and he'd stuck to me for four years, it might have gone on. It's a rotten old world anyhow, and now what am I to do?"

Indeed it was to be wondered what she would have done, had it not been for Lu; for she was nothing of an actress, while her thin voice had become thinner and most of her evanescent prettiness vanished. Besides this, conscious of her waning charms, she had grown over eager to attract, and lost her head hopelessly with any new admirer.

Again and again she had been away, touring for two or three months—as she began to be drafted into secondary companies—usually more or less attached to some man or other, in whose affections she honestly believed that she had at last found an abiding place. For, pathetically enough, the poor little woman would have remained absolutely faithful had it been her fortune to meet with any man capable of permanent affection. But as it was she did not happen to attract that type: while she possessed no ideal equal to the task of upholding her in loneliness.

"It's just my rotten luck!" she would remark to Lu: "but somehow its only the wasters as ever get struck on me."

On this particular evening, when Lu returned for the last time to her dressing-room, she found Daisy, whose part was over in the second act, waiting for her, ready attired in evening dress; while one of her own smartest gowns was spread out over a chair.

"Lu!" before she had time to speak her friend was hanging coaxingly on to her arm: "Lu, you must come, Inge sent up a note to ask me to bring you; he's got some other men and they're having a supper at the Vienna. You must—Lu do! Just to please me. I went home in a taxi and got dressed and fetched your things, an' all."

"I'm dog tired. Besides I don't like that man. What does he want me for anyhow? Why can't you go alone, Daisy?"

"He'll be mad if you don't come. He's doing it all for you. Then there's others; they're English, an' I don't want



them to think I'm that sort ; to go about alone with a lot of men."

" Well, don't go at all. What does it matter to you if he's ropeable ; it won't hurt you."

" I like him : he knows lots of other fellows—I can't afford to lose any chance of making friends, Lu. It's different with you—you're so sure of yourself."

" I'm sure of one thing, that I'll never let myself be frightened of offending any man " : Lu was twisted round trying to unhook the wings from her shoulders ; and catching sight of Daisy's face in the glass, saw that her under lip was drawn up, trembling like a child's, her eyes swimming in tears.

" I can't bear going home. It seems so flat always going home to nothing : " she complained, so piteously that Lu relented.

" Help me out of this thing, and I'll come : " she said, then knitted her brows as Daisy bent over the fastenings : " Only look here ! if you want money, or anything, for God's sake ask me for it, and don't let men be bribing you into doing their dirty work for them."

" There was no question of money ; " a crimson flush spread over the back of Mrs. Ogilvie Buxton's neck—Miss Buxton as she was called in the programmes :—" a fellow just asks you to supper."

" No he doesn't, because he knows jolly well I wouldn't come ; he sets you on to ask me. If it isn't money it's jewellery or dresses ; I know your little ways, Daisy. If you could keep your head it wouldn't matter, but you can't. Gloves ? I shan't want gloves, shall I ? "

" You'd better take them ; people stare."

" That's what I'm there for : " retorted Lu, and throwing a scarf over her shoulders swept out of the room ; swinging her long gloves in her hand.

## CHAPTER XXX

PEOPLE did stare, openly, as Lu walked down the white and gold room of the Vienna, her green and silver clad figure reflected in the mirror at either side. For she still affected green ; not the soft shades of the gum leaves that she had once so loved, but a rather deep emerald which brought out all the colour in her eyes.

"That woman walks like a peasant : " remarked one stranger. "Look at the swing from her hips—as if she was used to carrying a weight on her head."

"That's what she is : " tittered the girl at his side. "Don't you know her ?—Lu Tempest the dancer. She used to be a milking hand at a dairy farm ; and just look at her now ; look at that frock ! It must have cost a small fortune."

"I am looking : " responded the man drily, "but not at the frock."

"When another woman comes in ; " remarked Lu, quite audibly : "they peep at her sideways in the glasses. When an actress comes in they stare as if they'd bought her and paid for her. They'd get on their chairs, if it 'ud help them to see any better."

There was no doubt about it that Lu was in a bad mood, and looked her best, as she inevitably did on such occasions ; full of impatient scorn, and disgust with everybody and everything ; openly rude to Inge and his English friend ; barely tolerant of the rich young squatter who made the third man of the party, and could scarcely keep his eyes off her.

Any other time the girl would have enjoyed talking to him ; for he knew and loved the country beyond the Ranges : but on this particular evening memory hurt her ; for she still felt bruised and sore, and intolerably heavy-hearted, from an encounter which had taken place that afternoon.

There had been a *matinée* ; and in a hurry to get home to the boys, Lu had changed into her walking things ; then—refusing even to wait while Mary removed her make-up—tied a thick veil over her hat and slipped out of the stage-door ; trusting to the fact of it being the tea hour to reach home unnoticed.

But, as usual there was a little coterie of men and boys waiting to see her come out ; mostly of the humbler classes with a large admixture of country folk, for it was the Saturday before the Cup week and the town was full.

It was impossible for Lu to see these people in their awkwardly cut, or shabby, best clothes ; so keenly interested and patient—the very people by whom she lived—without responding. Thus, as they stood on one side, respectfully enough in spite of their murmurs of :—“ Well, Lu ! ”—“ ‘Ello, Lu,” she raised her head and nodded and smiled ; upon which a youth pushed his way from among the others ; planted himself full in her path, and leaning forward, peered through her veil.

For a moment Lu stared in astonishment ; then gave a little cry of recognition.

“ Harold ! ” she put out one hand and clung to his arm, with an unaccountable rush of warm joy at her heart. “ Harold ! Oh, I am glad to see you. I wrote, why didn’t you answer ? You didn’t tell me you were coming ! ”

The words tumbled from her in an excited torrent, but with a jerk the lad shook himself free ; his heavy freckled face crimson as he glanced round at the retreating crowd.

“ Let be : do you take me for one o’ your mashers ? ” he drew a little back and stared at her. “ I heard how it was, as how you was stage dancing ; an’ gone on the street, an’ painted—an’ now, by gum, I’ve seen for myself ; an’ seen enough too ! ”

“ This ? ” with a trembling laugh Lu slipped one hand up beneath her veil and touched her cheek. “ Oh ! but I’m not generally like that ; that’s part of my business ; my trade.”

“ Anyone can see that ; it’s sticking out a mile ! ” and with a rough laugh Harold turned to go, a shambling ill-made fellow of twenty, with the awkward gait, bent shoulders and long arms of a field labourer ; an extraordinary contrast to the slim, upright figure of his sister ; emblematical of a country where the women have sprung forward a full generation in advance of the men.

“ Harold ! ” Lu moved after him, and again laid her hand entreatingly on his arm. “ You mustn’t go like this, after all these years : you must come home with me. I’m just going back to tea : I want—I want you to see my boy.”

"Oh, there's that too, is there? No, thank you; I don't want no blanky bastards pushed down my throat."

With a sudden jerk he stopped and drew himself upright. "That's not swearing: blanky ain't swearing. I don't swear no more—I've found salvation—swear nor drink nor smoke. There was a preacher come round to the township last spring-ploughing; an' the Spirit took me—took me strong. It's the only thing as I ever had o' my own! You all went against me; but that chap understood—he said as how it was because I was set apart and anointed o' the Lord.

"I was wicked—a real hot 'un, I tell you straight, my girl:" the young fellow's eyes glowed with a sort of pride as he spoke. "It were all their fault in the beginning—they didn't aught a' gone an' done it;" his voice sank to the sulkily, resentful tone of old days. "It was they that set me off; what with broodin' over it, an' one thing an' another: an' then you! All the chaps round knowing as you'd made straight fur Hell with that there Orde, curse him! But the preacher fellow he made all that clear. He said as how the Lord was letting the lot of you go that way; just for to point an awful example to me as He'd chosen. Father an' mother, an' Jim—and then you an'——"

"That's enough—all of us burning in fire to save your soul alive!" Lu laughed bitterly. "I wonder you aren't ashamed to talk such wicked folly, Harold Tempest."

"It's true enough—and you an' your kid, a child o' shame. If you don't come over to us it's hell fire for you—for ever an' ever."

"An' what o' the Christ, as you people believe died to save sinners—loved children?" Lu's voice was icy, and she drew herself away, with a shiver of disgust, from the hot hand he had laid on her arm. "What do you make of Him? Tell me that, you fool. If there ever was a Christ—if there is a God——"

"If there is a God? Hark at her! The wonder is you're not struck dead, there where you stand. You don't believe in God? Well, you will some day; when you're burnin' in Hell—burnin', up and never not done; with all that there paint blistering off your face, my fine lady. You'll think you'd best a' stayed at the farm—the country's a clean place."



"The farm was unutterable—filthy, and you know it."

"It were clean filth ter what this is. I've been in the town one night an' it's enough for me. I'm going back—ter sweat sin out o' me at the plough."

"At least shake hands ;" Lu's heart was suddenly tender. "After all we're brother and sister."

"Them as are with me are all brothers and sisters in the Lord. When you repent—when you finds grace—" blustered the boy in awkward, parrot fashion ; moved a few steps, then half turned ; an ugly curiosity in his eyes. "That chap as you went off with——"

"That's no business of yours:" with a sudden movement Lu swung round ; walked a few steps away ; looked back. Saw that Harold was moving in the opposite direction—a dull blot on the dusty sunshine of the deserted street—and hesitated ; thinking that she would go after him, try once more to make friends. Then, remembering what he had said about David, and realizing that—apart from everything else—they were poles asunder, went on her way ; somewhat the poorer, for she had got into the habit of forgetting Harold as he was at the farm, remembering him only as the bare-footed comrade with whom she had wandered through the forest, exploring and snaring, in those old days, before the world first began to go wrong.

All that evening the lad's words had been haunting her :—  
"It was them—and then you." What right had he to shift the responsibilities of his ill-doings on to her shoulders ? The fight had been hard enough for her too. If anyone was to blame it was Julian ; and that was unthinkable. After all it did not begin with him ; or her mother ; it began with life itself. No one was to blame ; any more than one reverberation of an echo is to blame for that which follows. We cannot move or speak without awaking fresh echoes ; but it is not our fault, we are helpless in this whispering gallery of a world ; where it all began so long before we were born.

## CHAPTER XXXI

"TIRED?" Inge leant forward and gazed with tender solicitude into Lu's eyes. It was his rôle ; he had found that a man can win his way to a woman's heart by such means ; that to unlace her boots for her, put a cushion behind her back—taking it for granted that she is a fragile creature, demanding infinite care—is quite as effective, and far easier, than breaking lances in her honour.

"No, I'm never not tired." Lu's absence of mind showed in her slip-shod grammar. "Only bored ;" she would have added, had she not happened to catch Daisy's eye. If she was rude she would displease Inge, who, for some reason or other the little woman wished to be pleased. Yet there was a curious eagerness in her glance, and for a moment Lu wondered what she really did want ; then pulled herself together : for of course Daisy only wished her to be nice to her friend of the moment ; and with an assumption of good-fellowship she pushed forward her glass : "I'll have some more champagne, perhaps that'll cheer me up."

"To our next meeting ; and many, many such meetings." Inge clinked his glass against hers, then dropped his voice.

"You'll let me drive you home ? Thomson will take Miss Buxton."

"Perhaps so : " Lu's sudden spurt of gaiety had flickered out. Harold's words came back to her. Well, anyhow, he had found salvation out of their wreckage, or so he thought. Though the girl's shrewd common sense told her that such a conversion was of that rocket-like type, which finds its end on earth, not in heaven.

She was bored with her host, her own thoughts, the inane chatter going on around her. Then, as her eyes strayed vaguely, in search of something to distract her, Inge saw that she flushed with sudden animation : nodded, smiled and beckoned to someone farther up the room ; then flashed a beaming glance towards Daisy.

"You've found a friend : " he remarked, rather sourly, but the girl did not appear even to hear him.

"It's Martin ! Daisy, it's Martin Brandt : did you know he

was in town ?" And again she smiled and beckoned : saw Brandt shake his head, with the pretence of a frown : sat very stiff and still for a moment, like a child that is consciously trying to be good. Then gave a sudden shrug of defiance, rose from her chair ; and sweeping across to the table where Brandt sat alone, seated herself opposite to him, her chin on her hands.

" Martin Brandt—you're a pig ! What do you mean by coming to town and not coming and seeing us ? If Daisy had not dragged me out to supper, I'd never have known as you were here."

" I only got down this afternoon."

" But you might a' come to tea—you weren't even at the theatre."

" No."

" Well now ! What have I done now." With a quick movement Lu drew herself upright, her hands folded upon the table in front of her. " Out with it !"

" It's not what you have done—it's what you won't do." Brandt still spoke with the same country drawl : he had broadened a little, but otherwise the passage of seven years had left him unchanged ; large and sunburnt, wearing his evening clothes with a sort of awkwardness, despite his many visits to town. " Look here, Lu, has it ever struck you that I've been coming pretty regular for a goodish number of years, and getting myself turned down. Well, I reckon it's time I took a spell off. If I've got any sort o' pride about me, which I doubt. An' look here ! you've no sort o' business over here now. There's that pink Johnny looking as if he could kill me. He's shouted you a champagne supper, which is more than I'll ever do ; you ought to be talking to him, not to me."

" Tiny," Lu leant forward, with both her elbows on the table, and touched the back of his brown hand with one finger : " don't be cross. After all, you're the only man friend I have ; you an' Cheiko."

" Thank you."

" And you first, 'cause I knew you first."

" Thank you again."

" And I don't want his rotten old champagne : I only drink wine when I don't know what to talk about. It's not like that with you. I'd rather a hundred times have a mug o'

billy tea ; all smoky, an' tasting o' the gum leaves. Tiny, do you remember the day you an' I an' David drove up to the Black Spur an' camped while the coach went on to Lindt's—the day we saw the lyre bird ? It must have been near on three years ago, David was in kilts—we don't never have any good days like that now."

" You could have them every day if you liked. Lu—don't the Ranges ever call you ?"

" But, Martin, we're not talking about that ; I want to tell you about David : " the girl spoke hurriedly, she did not want to think of the Ranges just then. " He's going to school regularly now—not the State school, a real good, private school, he and Hugh. And they're learning to play cricket ; he's got little white flannel trousers and shirt, and teeny pads : and, my word, you should see him bat, it's a treat ! I had his photo taken ; I was going to send it to you, but now you've come an' you'll see him. He's nearly as tall as Hugh, you never saw such a boy. But Hugh don't look very strong, I'm not going to keep them in town this summer, I'm——"

" Them ? What does Daisy say to you monopolizing both the boys in that fashion ?"

" Oh, she leaves me to manage them. Hugh gets on her nerves : she's awfully fond of him in a kissing sort of way, but she's not got much patience, poor little Daisy ! Oh, Martin ! There are so many things I want to talk to you about. I want to ask you what you think of that new silver mine—the Silver Star Company—I'm wondering whether to put money into it : or whether to start taking up some land ; I believe David——"

" Miss Tempest, I'm sorry to interrupt ; but they're starting to shut up the place, and I think you promised to let me have the pleasure of driving you home." It was Inge who spoke, smoothly enough, though his face and neck were redder than ever as he leant over Lu ; after one cool insolent glance, apprising both Brandt and his clothes.

It was the merest glance, but unfortunately Lu's sharp eyes intercepted it.

" Thanks, but I don't think there was any promise, except what you promised yourself. Besides—I find I'm more of a Jew than I thought."



"Eh ;" Inge stared blankly.

"I don't like ham. Come along, Martin : all the trams will have stopped, let's walk."

"Lu, you're abominable : " protested Brandt, as he followed the girl out into the street. "You want whipping ; my oath if you spoke to me like that !"

"Yes ?"

"I'd—Well, anyhow, what was all that stuff about ham, and being a Jew ?"

"Because I think he's the dead spit of cold ham, and he is—" Lu's tone was defiant, "that sandy thatch of his like the bread-crumbs. But don't let's talk of him. What a night ! Tiny, I'd like to walk right out in the country miles, and miles, and miles. I get mad for walking in the open like other folks get for drink or love. No, don't call a taxi, let's walk. Do you know, I'm so much of a careful working girl still I'd like to take off my shoes and stockings, to save 'em from spoiling in the damp." And she glanced down, with a laugh at her white satin slippers, as she gathered her skirts together. "That's what the stall people call 'the common strain in me !'"

"And I—I'd like to pick you up an' carry you to the other end of the world, the country beyond the mountains." Brandt's voice was deep with feeling.

"I believe you're mad to-night, like I am. All day things have been happening, hurting things. An' now I've gone fey. Don't Collins' Street look lovely, Tiny, all a shimmer, like a shining way to glory ?"

And indeed she was right.

The long straight street up which they were moving was all agleam, for there had been a sharp shower of rain while they were in the restaurant, and the lights from either side were reflected as brightly as though it were a river.

Just as they crossed a crowded main street the public-houses were disgorging ; and a woman who came out of one almost ran into Lu ; muttered a curse ; stood swaying to and fro for a moment, beneath the full glare of a gas lamp, then turned off down a dark passage at the side of the footpath.

"I've seen that woman before somewhere. I don't know how it is, but I seem to know her face : " remarked Lu, then

fell silent as they breasted the hill, turned a few steps to the right ; and paused.

"Let's go through the gardens ;" she said : "We can cut across when we get to the other side : it won't be far out of the way. I feel as if I couldn't breathe in the house to-night." And crossing the road she moved into the dim shelter of the trees : walked on for some time in silence ; then reached an open glade, with jutting herbaceous borders, and paused.

"How good it smells after the rain—what a difference from the theatre ! Them white things under the trees, what a scent ! it goes right through one."

"Phlox—odd how it's only the white and pale colours that show in this light :" answered Brandt. "There's nothing of you in that green gown, except the lacy thing round your shoulders—and your neck and face. You mad thing ! What other woman would ever come walking through these gardens after twelve at night in an evening dress ; it only shows that you're not made for it, or for the life it typifies."

"No, it's made for me—that's the difference. Martin ! what a mad night ! I could dance out here, better than I ever danced at the theatre. Will you ? But no—if you were in your country clothes you might ; but not in those things : all confined up in black. Do you know what I used to think when I first started on the stage—when I was frightened, before I got used to things ?—that all the men in the stalls looked as though they was wearing tombstones, over the place where their hearts ought to be. I'd get a sort of half glimpse o' them sideways, and it was for all the world like Kew cemetery, with the flowers left out. Fancy dancing with a whole funeral rolled into one !"

"Oh ! but I'd love to dance to-night ;" she went on, with the old, deep singing note in her voice. "There's the statues—rotten art they call them, but they seem real to me, because of something someone used to tell me of such people."

"I wish they'd come !" standing on an open space of lawn. Lu bent forward, stretching herself with that long quivering breath which meant a lust for movement. "How I wish they'd come and dance with me. There's Diana :" she flung out her arms with a gesture of entreaty :—"but there they stand, and I'm tired of dancing alone."

"Lu ! come back with me : " Brandt caught both her hands, and held them ; trembling with the effort which it cost him not to take her in his arms ; carry her off with him, there and then.

" Look here, Lu ! I'm tired of dancing alone, too. I want my wife. I want to take you, and hold you ; before the blanky town gets any more of you. Every time I come you are a little different : it's as if you were being coated over with crystal, hard and bright."

" I know : I like it. It makes me feel that nothing can hurt me again. Once I'm all like that, through an' through, I'll be safe !"

" Safe from what ?"

" Safe from feeling, safe from being hurt."

" An' what will then be left of you. You'll go on trying to be different from anyone else, till you go so far you'll come right round ; just a hard, bitter woman like the rest of them—common as dirt. Your tongue was always sharp, Lu. But you never meant to hurt people. Now you aim to hurt. That fellow to-night—you wouldn't have said that even a year ago : maybe it was smart, but it wasn't you."

" Martin, do you know what I want ?" All the gaiety was wiped out of Lu's face ; there was a scudding race of clouds across the sky and the moonlight flickered ; but Brandt could see that she had grown white ; and stood heavily, all the spring gone, stooping a little, as though the earth drew her. " I want to just gather Dave up to my heart. And for the rest, all the outside people, I want to hurt and kill ; and make everyone suffer for their share in this muddling old world."

" And us others—Daisy and I, and Cheiko and—above all—Hugh."

" Dear little Hughkins—but even him ; and you and the others. I don't really want to hurt you, I want you near me : but I'm frightened of you laying a finger on the inmost me—on the real soul of me. It's no good talking about the country ; the country terrifies me. You must be happy to live right away from the movement of the cities. And to be happy in that way means that you dare to let yourself have time to think : to let all soft things into your life. To be like a snail without a shell, ready for any bird to snap you up. To build on the hope that everything's going to last for ever. In the town

it's all twisting and turning and changing ; merry one moment, sad the next ; all coming and going. A lame beggar on the curb, and you think, what a cruel world ! Then a fire-engine comes dashing past ; all lights and noise, and you forget there's anyone in the world as can't move from the place they're set in."

" But it doesn't make you happy."

" No, it doesn't make me happy : there's two things in the world, now, that make me happy ; David an' my dancing. I don't want anything else. For I reckon that what's got the chance to make you happy, has got the same chance to hurt you."

" One must take risks——"

" I've taken my risk, Martin Brandt ; once and for all."

" It's only the town, the poison of it, makes you feel like that. Up among the Ranges——"

" Don't——" Lu's voice was sharp. Then she caught her breath in a half sob, shivering as she dragged her light scarf round her shoulders.

" Don't talk to me of the Ranges to-night ; I can't bear it. I'm cold. Come along, let's walk quickly—it 'ull be morning if we stand yapping here much longer. And on the wet grass ! I must be mad ! Suppose I get twisted all double with rheumatism and can't dance any more."

" I was an ass to let you come at all—in those thin slippers too : you're shivering, woman !" Brandt had his coat off and was wrapping it clumsily round her as he spoke.

" No, take your coat—don't be so foolish ! How can you walk through the street in your shirt sleeves ?"

" What does it matter ? Everyone's asleep. Besides that's me. I'm far happier and more at home in my shirt sleeves than I am in a black coat. Lu, for once you'll do as I tell you."

With a sudden humility Lu crossed the coat sleeves over her shoulders and held them clutched across her bosom. Then, picturing the effect of the wide back hunched over hers, and the long tails dangling above the train of the white and green gown, returned to earth with a dry smile at her own expense.

" Bring it back to-morrow, and I'll press it out for you ;" she remarked practically, as she helped Brandt into his coat on the steps of the same little house where she had first opened



the door to him, seven years earlier—half dismayed and infinitely amused at his size ; a hurried slip of a girl, in a crumpled print gown, with an apology for a cap flying from the back of her head.

Lu had grown since then ; but she was still obliged to stand on tip-toe as she helped him on with his coat, warm from her own neck.

“ Martin ! don’t keep away. You’re the naturalest thing in this unnatural old world. I can’t ever love you the way you want, because all the loving’s burnt out of me with watching and longing for one man ; but I can’t do without you all the same. Outside I’m young : but inside I’m all burnt up an’ dry ; an’ even the ashes are all for him. It’s awful to care that way, Tiny.”

“ Yes—” agreed Brandt slowly :—“ you’re right. It’s awful.” For a moment he stood gazing down upon her, his hands deep in his hip pockets : “ I reckon we’ve both been ploughing the same furrow, young’un ; for seven years too—There was a chap in the Bible that they say waited for twice seven years. There’s a sight of value in waiting, Lu, an’ it seems I’m just about starting out on my second lap.”

## CHAPTER XXXII

THERE was a scene with Daisy, who was still waiting up, when Lu got home that night, and who accused her of being unpardonably rude to Inge—declaring that he was furious and would never speak to any of them again ; of carrying on a liaison with Brandt ; of want of heart, of thought of gratitude ; of every sentiment which the little woman firmly believed was owing to her.

But somehow it did not all ring quite true. Lu realized that Daisy wanted to know how far things had gone with Brandt ; half hoping for the worst, as in some measure condoning her own recklessness. Also that she did not really know what had been said to make Inge so furious : was anxious, and yet, in some way, triumphant.

“ I told him to be careful for his own sake : I told him you’d turn nasty on him ; an’ now he’ll see that I was right. You

turn on us all ; care for nobody but yourself. If I was dead and buried to-morrow it wouldn't take a flutter out of you. No, don't touch me! You're cold as ice—whatever I do, whatever I come to, you'll have yourself to blame, Lu Tempest. You've set the kid against me, and Brandt—a real body snatcher that's what you are. Some day you'll be sorry, some day when you're forsaken like I am ; then you'll know what I suffer." She stormed, the tears streaming down her face, at the thought of her own grievances.

" You've been forsaken more than once. The wonder is you don't learn sense."

" You to throw that in my teeth, you devil you ! A beggar I picked out of the gutter, with not even the decency to wear a wedding ring. My God, to think what I have been brought down to—a weaker woman would have killed herself before this."

" I'm going to bed : I advise you to do the same ; it 'ull be light in another hour." Lu's voice was cold : she was sick of such scenes ; which always presaged some fresh adventures on Daisy's part ; were indeed made the excuse for each as it occurred. And yet, poor little flimsy thing, how happy she was in her brief affairs ; a mere pretence of love from some man, no matter how worthless he might be, and she was overflowing with merriment and kindness, diffusing sunshine on all around her.

It was almost daylight as Lu crept into the boys' room for a last look at them ; already the moon had sunk from sight ; the velvety darkness and scurrying clouds being replaced by a chill white light which showed David sleeping soundly, lying on his back, one arm above his head, all warmly flushed and sunburnt ; while, in the next bed was Hugh, doubled up upon his side, one limp wisp of black hair across his moist forehead.

For a long while Lu lay awake and thought of them. What would they do when they became men ? What would they think of her when they began to see her really as she was ? Not simply in child fashion, as part and parcel of their own existence.

She remembered the emerald pendant Inge had sent her : at the time it had seemed a fine cutting thing to sell it, and put by the money for the boys. It was right that men should be

made to pay : for the women there was the suffering ; it was the only way they could get even. Lu repeated the old argument over to herself, but somehow, to-night, it would not ring true.

In some moods Lu had deliberately tried to attract, to draw men on. She liked to see them forgetting all economy and common sense : all the prejudices of their class, all their conventional stolidity : flushed, foolish, even tearful. It all seemed like a paying back of something long owing : a usury, in which the jewels which she accepted, and never wore, appeared the least part.

And yet, curiously enough, it was never Orde himself whom she desired to hurt, to revenge herself on. It was all these others ; who wished to do as he had done, with no excuse of divinity ; while it was for her own hurt, not for his part in it, that she desired satisfaction.

Of course it was all right and fair : she was sure of that : but how would it appear to the boys when they grew a little older ? Lu had no delusion on the subject of her own purity : she was none the better, rather the worse, in that she accepted so much and gave so little. It is not a pretty trait in a woman's character that she should enjoy seeing even a fly impaled alive upon a pin : and though she never gave her body she used it deliberately and shamelessly to attract.

A time would come, must come, when the boys would realize all this. For there is a certain period of intense clear-sightedness in youth, which later life blunts.

There had been a son of a rich Riverina squatter, down the last Cup week, for his first taste of manly gaiety, who had fallen down and worshipped her ; had been madly excited over his winnings, and scared lest she might be offended by the costly present which they enabled him to buy for her.

Then, on the evening before he departed up-country—after a passionate, and incredibly youthful, adieu in her dressing-room, at the end of the performance, when the boy laid his whole soul bare—she had supped at the Vienna with a party of friends : and coming out just before midnight, laughing and talking, had met him face to face ; and encountering the grave, candid eyes realized, in that moment, that the boy saw right through her, recognizing her as a mere shell of a woman.

No wonder Daisy said her heart was so small—it was a

marvel it did not rattle when she walked : to be able to go out to supper, to laugh, and talk after such a scene.

Thank goodness there was Brandt. He must take the boys up into the country before any woman such as she was could hurt them. Not yet, of course, there was plenty of time ; but some day, before they had any chance of sinking their manhood in the city.

For after all Martin was right. The city was a sinful place : it seemed as if the houses squeezed all the life and strength out of people, leaving them no room to grow.

Harold had said the same : one night of it had been enough for him. The country was brutal ; but it was real ; showed for what it was : made no fine pretence.

How ugly the people had looked, huddling out of the public-house. That woman with the haggard face and puffy eyes who had almost run into her beneath the gas lamps ; curious how she reminded her of someone.

Lu's thoughts had been wandering vaguely ; but at this—like a picture flashed upon a white sheet—came the memory of a long ward ; rows of beds and girls' faces on the pillows, and Mrs. Schwartz, that fervent advocate for matrimony—who had since died of cancer from a connubial kick upon the breast. But it was not of her Lu was thinking ; nor of Rosie, with the blue ribbons, or Gladys May ; but of a girl with round country face and straight black hair, sitting up in bed declaring it was all " a shame."

Then the picture changed and the bed was surrounded by screens, from behind which came a sound of sobbing ; while a whisper went round, from one to the other.

" It's Mimi, that's squashed her kid."

Yes, of course, that was it ! Horrified into complete wakefulness Lu sat up in bed, and pushed her hair back from her face.

It was Mimi—that drink-sodden slattern ! She could not realize what was left of the sonsy-faced girl that she should recognize her ; but there was no doubt in her mind. It was Mimi, the girl who had come of such decent parents, who was so afraid of them : the only one that had ever said a word against her betrayer : who had no love for her child : whose respectability had been too great for her maternity, though not for her passion.



What a day it had been ! Harold and then Mimi : it seemed as if the dead bones of the past were stirring. Things went by threes : did it mean—could it mean—that Orde himself would be the next ?

### CHAPTER XXXIII

A FEW weeks later Daisy—who had been wearing everyone's patience to a thin thread—carried her pettishness and unreliability to such a pitch, that one final rehearsal, for which she had kept everyone waiting, ended in a battle royal ; a scene of recrimination and fury on her part, and much lurid plain speaking on that of the manager ; followed by Daisy's departure to Sydney, in hopes of being taken on by an English company, which had just arrived and was advertising for local supers.

Lu never forgot that exodus : perhaps because it was fated to be the last of many such scenes : perhaps because it was a dry hot-wind day which seemed to strip each nerve bare, leaving it painfully sensitive to every impression.

The holidays had begun, and the boys were at home : Hugh crying himself sick because his mother had slapped him, declaring he was a nuisance ; and David in a state of violent revolt, kicking at everything he came across, by way of protest against his friend's ill-treatment.

The little house was full of paper and boxes ; tumult and weeping : while Mrs. Platt had chosen that day of all others, to make jam ; which burnt, and smelt horribly each time Daisy despatched her on some fresh errand ; from which she returned scarlet faced, and perspiring, while the rest of them were burnt up with dryness and heat.

Never had Lu felt less inclined for the theatre than she did that evening, when Daisy had at last departed. For once all the spring seemed to have gone out of her limbs : and she dragged herself about wearily ; getting the tired children to bed, bathing them herself ; comforting Hugh ; mixing them both iced lemon-drinks, as a great treat. Then, when peace reigned at last ; and they lay quiet, beneath the white sheets, sitting on the edge of Hugh's bed—because he was the saddest—with one hand stretched across to David, and singing to

them ; scraps of songs she remembered from the old touring days, when her repertoire had to include singing as well as dancing ; stirring country songs, in which the audience might join with a great stamping of feet.

“ The doctor's in the kitchen,  
And the boss is in the shed,  
The overseer's musterin' on the plain :  
Sling your bluey down, old boy,  
For the clouds are overhead  
You're welcome to a shelter from the rain.”

And such like fragments ; with “ Clancy of the Overflow ” set to a swinging chant of her own imagining.

That night Lu seemed to be dancing with her body only. It was as if the long strain of the day had detached her mind, which was vaguely busied with the question as to what she should give David for a Christmas present ; shot through with the memory of Daisy's tear-stained face, flushed with an odd sort of elation.

In these days the mimicry of birds and animals was kept for seasons when the town was full of country folk, such as the Cup week or the time of the Agricultural Show ; and Lu was appearing as a Columbine of the mid-Victorian era, with full skirt of white tulle, laced satin bodice, and a wreath of crimson roses on her smooth black hair ; while Cheiko was a Pierrot.

Suddenly it all seemed conventional and foolish : a silly way of earning one's living, of spending one's life. Lu felt as though she was dancing like a doll, with wooden joints worked by wires. All the joy of movement seemed to have gone : and she wondered nervously what it would be like if she were hissed off the stage.

But the audience did not appear conscious of anything lacking : and at the end of the last scene, as she stood on tiptoe, vibrating with that curious butterfly movement that was so peculiarly her own—with Cheiko apparently slain by love, lying prone at her feet—there was a shower of bouquets ; while baskets, wreaths and harps of tortured flowers were handed up over the footlights ; among these being one great bunch of crimson roses, and a small white box, beneath the ribbon of which was thrust a note.

Rather characteristically Lu opened the box first, found that

it contained a bracelet—a delicate chain of platinum, with large clear diamonds set half an inch apart, sixteen in all—then turned to the note.

“ Will you come to supper at ‘ The Paris ’ with me to-night : it is the last time I shall ask you. For all our sakes I advise you to come ; and wear the bracelet, which I only hope may meet with more favour than my last gift. I will wait outside the stage-door till you send some message : or, better still, come yourself,

“ Yours,

“ HERBERT INGE.”

With a sudden decision, partly bred of disgust, Lu tossed the jewel-case, the scrap of paper and ribbon, over to her maid.

“ Take it to the stage-door, and give to a gentleman you’ll find waiting there.”

Mary hesitated. “ What sort of a gentleman, miss ? There may be a good number.”

“ Stoutish, clean shaved, reddish neck ; in evening dress. Ask him if he’s Mr. Inge and give him that parcel.”

“ But is there no message, miss ? ”

“ Tell him Miss Tempest says, ‘ No thank you,’ that’s all. Do you think you can find him ? ”

“ Oh yes, miss, if it’s Mr. Inge, sits in the front row of the stalls. The gentleman as comes after Miss Buxton.”

The girl spoke with the pert glibness of an ignorant person, proud of her own powers of penetration. Hesitated a moment, glancing curiously at her mistress : saw that Lu had bent forward towards the glass, with frowning brows, apparently engrossed in removing her make-up, and slipped from the room, with the small white package in her hand.

A few days later, came a scrawl, in the large hand that Daisy in common with most small women, affected. A letter which gave the impression of being hurried ; not so much owing to the pressure of time, as the writer’s desire to get a disagreeable task over as quickly as possible ; lengthening out into a voluminous postscript, when its main purpose was accomplished.

“ DARLING LU ; (you see I am not changed to you !) Harrison’s show is a horrid frost, such bad pay, nobody could live

on it. You may be surprised to hear I have left the stage and am going to Europe with Mr. Inge, writing this on board ship—first class too!!!—Thank God I've at last found a man as understands and really loves me for myself. That's what killed me all through ; that nobody, not you, nor Hugh, nor nobody has ever really cared for me. Thank God my troubles are all at an end now. Kiss my darling boy for me. I know you'll be good to him for my sake, though you do think as how I'm such a rotter,

“ Your gloriously happy,  
“ DAISY.”

“ P.S.—Inge says that he will send for the kid directly we are settled.—D.”

“ P.S.—You can have all the clothes I left ; they will help pay for Hugh's board ; he don't eat much. But I'll send you something when I get to London. Dear Lu, I forgive you everything, and only hope you'll be as happy as I am some day,

“ Your friend,  
“ MARGUERITE INGE.”

“ That's what I call myself ; and so I am in the sight of God. Though we can't be married yet because of his father ; it has something to do with the law in England.

“ Isn't it funny, and sort of sad, the short of his name's the same as Bertie's, which was Albert ? I call him ' Herb,' the other wouldn't not seem lucky,

“ Yours,  
“ DAISY.”

So that was what it all meant ! With perfect clearness Lu followed the working of Daisy's intricate little mind. Inge had been attracted, “ smitten ” as she would have said, when he had met her first in Adelaide, the last week of the touring season. Had followed her to Melbourne, and there, fallen a victim to Lu's beauty and personality.

Any man could deceive Daisy, she was as incapable as a child of managing her own business affairs : and yet in the lesser ways of love she displayed genuine astuteness. It was no use trying to dissuade Inge ; showing any jealousy, or making a scene. She was absolutely certain that Lu would



have nothing to do with the man ; " turn him down " as she expressed it. The moment this fact was grasped she realized that her best plan was to bring them together as much as possible ; encourage Inge to hope so that, as his advances were the more ardent, his rebuff might be the more complete ; and he would turn to her for comfort.

It had taken longer than she had anticipated. Inge had been very angry that night at the Vienna ; but by no means discouraged ; there had been an incessant bombardment of letters and presents. But before Daisy took the decisive step of departing to Sydney, she realized that the end had come.

The bulky red-faced man was almost piteous in his complaints. " I'll try her again. I'll send her something she'll really like. And then, by Hell, if she turns me down ; I'll cut the whole thing, never look at her again. 'Pon my soul, Daisy, I don't know what I'd have done without you—if only other women had half the heart ! You're a good little soul, Daisy. Damn it all ! you're worth twenty of her, when all's said and done. But what a woman, my God, what a woman ! "

" I couldn't help it : " said Lu to herself as she tore the letter into tiny pieces ; carried them to the kitchen and poked them in at the back of the fire ; wondering how long it would all last, and how soon Daisy would appear back again. " I couldn't have done anything—I didn't know enough. There was nothing I could have done. "

But for days she was haunted by the feeling that she had failed her friend, for somehow this affair loomed larger than any of the others.

London was a long way off. It was a large place : larger even than Sydney, more insidious than " the West. " It had the trick of engulfing people, swallowing them down so that they never appeared, or were heard of again. And Daisy was such a helpless, such a hen-brained, creature. What would happen when Inge forsook her, away in a strange country, as he was bound to do : for to Lu's mind any man's relationship to any woman seemed merely a matter of time.

Then there was Hugh. After a little hesitation Lu decided that there was no need to tell the child anything. His mother had gone away so often and come back again. In six months all might be as it was before, argued the girl, though the conviction of finality was strong in her own mind.

## CHAPTER XXXIV

DURING the weeks following Daisy's departure it seemed that Hugh began to grow curiously old and grave. He still played with David, but in a detached sort of way, quickly becoming tired of it, as a grown-up person will do, and forgetting what he was about, to the younger boy's intense disgust ; for whatever David happened to be doing at the moment seemed, to his mind, the only thing in life worth considering.

It was the same at school, for soon after the beginning of the new term the teacher reported the boy as showing no interest in his work ; while he slipped steadily back in all his classes.

And yet it seemed as though he was always thinking : standing with his forehead pressed against the glass of the window ; or sitting in the gardens, bent forward his hands dangling between his knees.

Lu set herself to discover the source of the trouble with all the subtlety of which she was capable ; for in everything which concerned the children she was growing each day more wary ; feeling her way along the lines of masculine growth with all the gentle care of a blind person : realizing that she could no longer expect unquestioning obedience ; that already they were beginning to stand a little apart, to criticize the conditions of their life, even her own part in it. A few words of endearment or a caress were no longer sufficient. Hugh's reserve and David's frank independence seemed to put her at a distance ; while it hurt her more than any words could say ; though her common sense told her that it was merely a matter of changing her focus ; growing to regard the children as boys, as future men, but no longer as babies : that was past and done with for ever.

Only once during this time did Lu manage to raise the curtain of Hugh's inner mind ; when, on the receipt of his mid-term report, she endeavoured to stir him into life by a good scolding.

Six months earlier the boy would have been reduced to tears by her words. But his reserve had grown. It was as difficult by now to stir him to emotion as joy ; and in the end

it was Lu herself who was shedding unaccustomed tears of exasperation and heartache.

"There is nobody to work for:" he remarked indifferently, at the end of her tirade; in his favourite attitude at the window; staring vaguely out into the dusty paper-strewn street.

"I like that!" declared Lu: "Do you mean to say I'm nobody. And I should like to know what your mother will say when she comes back again?"

"She won't ever come back again. That's it—there's nobody. All the chaps at school have fathers and mothers—they rag us 'cause we haven't. But Dave's better off than I am; he's got a mother."

"Hugh! what difference does that make—ain't I your mother as much as David's?" entreated Lu. Suddenly it seemed that her own son had slipped quite away out of her mind; she was fighting with Hugh for something she wanted for herself: yearning over him as if he had indeed been hers.

Always, in her own mind, Lu had declared that she had two sons; refraining from any open boast of Hugh's devotion merely from fear of hurting Daisy's feelings, whose motherhood had all seemed a sort of pretence; therefore it was with a sense of shock she realized that the shallow little woman, who had borne him, drew Hugh more than she could ever do, with all her love and care.

Leaning against the lintel at the opposite side of the window, it seemed as if her heart was being torn out of her body for the boy, with a physical straining towards him. Knowing so well what it means to be hurt by the person one loves most she longed to take him in her arms: pet him, kiss him, scold him into something more child-like.

But, for some inexplicable reason, she did not dare; for it seemed as if Hugh was growing in a mysterious way that put him apart from her, forbade her interference.

"Not that I care:" he went on. "I don't see much in father's myself. But it's rot the boys saying we never *had* any fathers. I remember mine. That's the way I seem to have got left. He's not dead, and my mother's not dead—but there it is."

"Hugh!—do I ever make any difference between David and you?"

“ You try, I know you try, I know you like me. But it’s different for all that. You know which it is opening the door, before ever I come in. It doesn’t matter, it’s all right : I know how it is with my own mother—it can’t ever be the same. Why, your eyes get all large and soft, and as green as anything, if it’s David.”

“ Hugh, you’re a duffer !” with a sudden effort of will Lu leant forward, took the boy by the shoulders and shook him : then kissed him on the forehead. “ Duffer ! duffer ! Green eyes ! It’s your eyes that are green. You’re jealous ! That’s what it is, you brat, jealous ! And what should I do without you I’d like to know—with David shouting and stamping about the place ; and breaking everything, and tumbling over everything, and forgetting everything !”

The tears were streaming down Lu’s cheek by this time, and Hugh smiled at her in his old kind way : declared it was all right ; patted her hands gently, then moved away from beneath them in a curiously detached fashion ; leaving Lu so troubled that, a few days later, she wrote to Brandt ; who answered her letter in person, coming down with the milk train from Gippsland.

“ Do you think I’m balmy sending for you like this ? Things must be reaching a pretty pass when I can’t hoe my own row for myself. But they’re drivin’ me distracted :” declared Lu, half laughing, as she poured out his coffee. “ By the way you oughtn’t to be dropping in to breakfast in this fashion. I shan’t have a morsel of character left, then what will the boys say—they’ll find it out, trust them ! They’re the queerest creatures. I used to think Daisy ’ud wear that child to bits : she never gave him a moment’s peace ; petting him and scolding him and sending him messages, and telling him all her troubles. And now she’s gone it seems that all the spring has gone out of him, he might be fifty.

“ Then there’s another thing. It appears that there’s a fashion for fathers at this school I’ve sent them to. I went to the prize-giving before Christmas, and saw them. Foolish looking things that looked as if they’d not been cast for the part ; roped in before they knew what they were about. An’ their boys all on pins and needles lest they should do the wrong thing and shame them. But there you are.”



Lu was standing in Hugh's favourite position ; staring out of the window, her forehead pressed against the glass.

" Dave's got bit with it too ;" there was something between laughter and tears in her voice :—" I believe I was a fool to send them to that sort of school : says he wants a man about the place, someone for him to talk to, that sprat !"

" Well, you know Lu, I'm here, there's my name for the boy. But I suppose it's no good talking."

" It 'ud only be a sort of patch up at the best ;" the girl's voice was half apologetic : " an' somehow, Martin, I can't bring myself to tell that sort of a lie, taking your name with the little I could give in return. Then it would seem like—well like sort of going back on the boy's own father."

" What has he to do with it now ? Why couldn't he have married you, instead of going off and leaving you to battle here all alone. I don't see that he's worth a blanky thought."

" He didn't believe in marriage ; we neither of us believed in it."

" You ! at seventeen, with as much knowledge of the world as a babe unborn !"

" That's no business of yours Martin Brandt : anyhow it's not David I'm worried about, he'll bullock his way through life. But Hugh's softer stuff : then he's growing so fast : an' thin ! why, one can almost see through him."

" You'd better let them both come back with me."

" It's too far, I couldn't, Martin. Besides there's no school and Dave would get beyond himself."

" Well look here, Lu ! I was thinking the last time I was down, and the kids looked sort o' mewed up in the town. There's an old fellow and his wife used to work for us upon the selection when my mother was alive ; he's got a small mixed farm now—fruit and a few cows—up at Beechleigh. It's only ten miles from Melbourne ; I know they've got room to spare : and you could run up and down, too. It's fine air ; all heath land, and open country away down to the sea, and across to the Dandenong Range, mile upon mile of it ! That 'ull fill Hugh's lungs, broaden out his chest and make men of them both."

" The country's pretty bare of trees ; and every wind that blows sweeps it ; but, by gosh, it smells good after rain. And there's the State school half a mile off—let 'em go there ;

rough it with the country kids and run barefoot. They'll have no guts left in 'em if you keep them mewed up much longer. It beats me, Lu ; you're all crude, and strong, and wholesome yourself, not a frill about you ! And yet, 'pon my oath, I believe you'd like those boys to sleep in gloves ! It's a big mistake, my girl. Anyone can make a gentleman, but it takes God's open world for the making of a man. Come up with me to-morrow and see the old MacIrvines : we'll walk back across country as far as Brighton."

"Can't my dear : you forget it's Wednesday and there's a matinée. You must come, I've got a new dance ! a butterfly dance, with great mottled brown and blue wings, and those what's-his-name things on my forehead that quiver. And Cheiko's a beetle, dear Cheiko ! Such a tune too—it runs through me, and tingles to the very tips of my toes. Martin ! I simply don't know how people ever live that don't dance ; that don't move quickly, run and stir their blood ; just sit and mope like broody hens. When I'm dancing I feel that nothing in the whole world could matter—except letting things matter."

Brandt realized the change of subject meant that Lu wanted time for thought. But a week later she herself volunteered to go to Beechleigh.

"I asked you to help me, so I suppose I'd better see what the place is like : " she said. Then added, with perfect frankness:—"Not that I expect to be struck on it, I've got a sort of down on farms, somehow Martin." And she smiled wryly.

But from the moment that he saw her stop just outside Beechleigh Station, and, throwing up her head draw in a deep breath of air, before turning off across the rough heath by his side—walking with that swinging movement, that in Lu meant a spirit of complete well-being—Brandt's hopes rose high. If he could once get her to like the country, trust herself to it, submit to its healing, there was no knowing what might follow.

The introduction to Mrs. MacIrvine was another triumph ; even the old man MacIrvine noticed the kindly fashion in which the two women took to one another.

"They've struck on ; " he declared. "Did you see the way my missus took hold o' both her hands : that's a sign—a

verra good sign. An' now you come along with me, an' look at the pigs."

Without doubt Brandt had spoken truly when he said there was plenty of room ; for it was a rambling, one-storied old house ; smelling of apples and white-wash, and swept by every wind of heaven.

" There's no trees," said old Mrs. MacIrvine : " some folks looks on that as a drawback. But I'm not much set on trees, they takes a power of good out of the air ; an' there's the clouds always moving and changing, better nor any trees. You come along inside, my dear, and I'll show you round.

" There's rooms enough, you see. Five of them empty ; sort of ghostlike they seem to me with no one in 'em—crying out for children. Martin says as how you have two boys—you look young for two boys, to be sure." And the little old woman peered up at Lu with kindly eyes.

" They're not both mine. Though I'm as fond of one as the other—there must never be no difference made between them." Lu's tone was aggressive ; it seemed as if, where Hugh was concerned, she was always asserting her affection.

" Neither there shall be if they comes up here. I don't hold by favouring children : " Mrs. MacIrvine spoke with brisk decision. She was one of the old pioneer women ; with the clear blue eyes of one who has looked far—seen many changes, faced many difficulties—and crimson-grained cheeks like autumn apples ; an apparently frail wisp of indomitable courage and strength.

" You'll be coming backwards and forwards yourself, and perhaps your man : " she added.

" No : " answered Lu slowly. Suddenly, for the first time, she felt ashamed of her own loneliness ; realized what Hugh had meant when he said " all the other boys have fathers : "

In the stage world no one wondered or questioned. A woman naturally retained her maiden, or assumed, name. And anyhow, it did not appear to matter ; one way or the other. Thus it was with a sense of effort, of almost brazen courage that she blurted out the next words.

" No, I will come—very often, I hope. But—I've lost my man."

She had no wish to deceive ; there was a sort of pride about

Lu which had always prevented her from any mean pretence. As Daisy, in a moment of anger, had declared, she had not the decency even to wear a wedding ring. Therefore, it was more as a rather pitiful effort at a joke, than anything else, that she used the words: "I have lost my man." Though after all it was true enough: he was her man; and somehow, in the hurly-burly of the world, he had been lost to her.

But for old Mrs. MacIrvine only one conclusion was possible, that being that Lu was a widow. For, in spite of her shrewdness, she possessed the limited outlook of a woman who has been blinded to much by her own happiness; marrying when a mere child, and living and working close at her husband's side through all the years that followed. To her it was a world where people mated and remained mated once and for all.

Of course there were "poor things" of spinsters, and others who had lost their husbands; while, infinitely removed from these, there were bad women, "hussies" as she called them; but it never entered her head that any friend of Martin Brandt's could be among these.

Thus Lu found herself accepted, quite simply, as one who had suffered, the worst of all possible bereavements: learning, as so many do, her first regard for moral laws with her first deception: always intending to explain; and putting it off: at the beginning for fear of breaking the amazing peace which the position accorded her; and then from finding that others were drawn into it, Brandt, himself, and the children, and even Mrs. Platt.

For it happened that a rush of fresh rehearsals prevented Lu from going up with the boys, as she had first intended, while it was a full week before she was able to get a single free afternoon. Therefore, as a sop to her own fears, she sent Mrs. Platt: with strict injunctions to let her charges run as wild as possible; just to keep them clean, and see they were fed, no more; for, truth to tell, she still smarted under Brandt's accusation of pampering.

For a couple of days Lu stayed in the little house alone, save for a new servant. Then, with the sudden decision which marked all she did, shut it up and went to an hotel; having found it unbearably empty and yet haunted: chiefly by memories of Daisy, who, in common with other weak things, possessed a faculty for interweaving herself with all



she touched ; her very untidiness stimulating the memory, with a litter of small belongings in every corner.

" It's four months since she went ;" Lu complained to Brandt one day : " and in that house I'm never free of her. I can't go to a drawer to look for a ribbon, which isn't there, without being reminded that she borrowed and forgot to return it ; and cut the buttons off my gloves to put on hers. Only yesterday, picking grasses in the far corner of the back-yard, I found a satin slipper she'd thrown at the cats. And on the scullery window-ledge—almost dry, and stinking to heaven—a bowl of milk she'd put some lace in to soak, an' then forgotten."

" She's not worth remembering."

" Not worth remembering !" in a flame of exasperation Lu turned upon Martin, as though it was all his fault. " Haven't you got the sense to know that those are the folk one can't never forget ? Feckless folk, that drive you crazy and waste all your good time ; folk as you never know what they'll be up to next. That's why you don't get loved as you ought, you're too dependable, Martin. Do you know what a woman said to me the other day ? A respectable married woman, with as good a husband as any woman ever had : ' I could love George,' she said : ' if only he'd come home drunk one night, with a woman on either arm.' "

It was in the Fitzroy Gardens that this conversation took place, during a breathing space between the matinée and evening performance ; while they were having tea together beneath the trees : English trees in a brave array of autumn tints.

Leaning back in his chair, with his hands deep in his hip-pockets, Brandt regarded Lu ; fine and delicate in her green silk gown ; her scornful face shaded by a wide-brimmed black hat.

" My oath—to look at her ! Then to hear her talk !" he ejaculated.

Lu shrugged her shoulders : " I was born common and I talk common : and shall do to the day of my death."

" My dear girl, it's not the way you talk. It's what you say, and the thoughts at the back of it, that I'd find fault with. Or should do, if they were your own thoughts, and not a polly-parotty of someone else."

"Well, you've got a nerve, Martin Brandt!"

"It's true all the same. You know that there are people who only live and love in a series of shocks and shrieks; and dry up if life isn't all fireworks! But it beats me why you should preach the doctrine of the second best; for if there's anyone that knows what real love might be, it's you. Though by this time you're in love with an idea: nothing more or less."

"Fire away, don't mind me: any old thing 'ull do for me!"

"Half in love with an idea; and half with your own pride that won't let you think you've changed. I don't believe myself that you ever were in love with the man himself. You were just made for loving and he was the first in the field."

"Now then, Martin! enough of that."

"Look here!" said Brandt, drawing up his long legs, taking his hands out of his pockets, and leaning forward; tapping the table gently with one finger.

"You know what a schicer is—I've heard you talk of it. Well, that's what that man is. Simply a schicer; a wind-bag, from what I've heard of him. Yes, I've heard of him; I've been doing a bit of prospecting on my own account."

"Then you're a mean spy!" Lu's cheeks were flaming.

"As you like; but it's true all the same. There are women enough in the world, ready and willing for sale. But what does he do? Takes a green girl like you: an' not only takes her body, but takes her belief in everything, in God, in right—"

"And what good would it have done me to keep any rotten old beliefs—beliefs that weren't any use in the world? You're a fool, Brandt; you go back to your chapel and your poddyding; and leave me and my affairs alone, or there'll be something broken a'tween us."

"I don't know that I mind if there is. It's time something happened. But first, just you tell me this. What did he give you in return for it all; he was a great hand at taking, but what did he give you?"

"He gave me what you can't never give, the teaching, the example of a gentleman. And learning! Why, he'd read more in a week than you've read in all your life, or would do in twenty lives!"

With exasperating coolness Brandt thrust his hands deep in his pockets again and stretched out his long legs.

"You're talking out of the top of your head, that's what you're doing!" he drawled. "That man taught you nothing, not even to speak king's English. You said you were common. You are common—clean and wholesome, and sweet and strong, like all common, everyday things. If he came back now you'd not be happy with him. You'd go too deep, you'd see through him, scratch all the varnish off his gentility. And he'd not be happy neither, 'cause he'd know you knew what he was worth. And that's Hell to his sort. Learning—what's learning and books? You've borne his child: you've gone down to the roots of life—of wisdom, an' that's better than learning. Teach you! He taught you nothing! All the depth of purity, all the love in you goes deeper than he's ever touched, my girl. Nor anyone else either, for the matter of that; unless, maybe, David. As for the example of a gentleman! He was a cad—that's what he was: a common cad, nothing more or less."

"That's enough!" With a rattle of cups Lu pushed back the table, flounced to her feet, and beckoned a waitress. "I'll pay for my own tea!" she said. Threw a shilling down on the cloth; and then, without a single glance at her companion, marched off with her head in the air. Down the sloping lawn, over the bridge at bottom, and out of sight; while Brandt sank back a little further in his chair; and, surveying his boots, pursed up his mouth in a soundless whistle.

Dimpling with amusement the waitress gathered the tea-things together, glanced at Brandt; and wondered if she might venture to speak: then decided that silence was more discreet. As she picked up the shilling, however, he roused himself:

"Look here, how much do I owe you?"

"Nothing, sir, it's only sixpence each."

"Then she's paid for my tea too!" For a moment Brandt's dismayed glance met the girl's twinkling eyes; then, suddenly he burst into an irresistible peal of laughter. "Look here, you give me that shilling back and I'll give you two instead, then we'll all be happy."

"Thank you, sir." The girl took the florin; lifted the laden tray; moved a step, then half turned. "The lady seemed put out, sir. I hope it wasn't the tea."

"No," said Brandt slowly: "it wasn't—well, *not* exactly the tea."

"Miss Tempest too—I'd be sorry for her to be vexed at anything here."

"It wasn't here. I wish it was—I'd kill it:" declared Brandt savagely, though his eyes still twinkled.

"Some things are hard to kill." The waitress spoke with the air of one who knows.

"You're right there, my girl. And the most damnably persistent, long lived, son of a gun is an hallucination, if you know what that means." And raising his hat Martin sauntered off across the lawn: wondering how it had all begun; only half aware that he had meant it to begin. That, as he himself would have expressed it, he was spoiling for a fight against that shadow of a past; which he was fully convinced, was all that now stood between Lu and himself.

Back at the hotel however he began to worry. Anything was better than the pretence of mere friendship: he had thrown his stone, set the pool eddying, stirred up its depths: showed that there was a bottom to it. But now he began to be half afraid of what he had done.

Lu's pride was something to be reckoned with. He did not mind how much she abused him. But supposing she chose to shut him out of her life; to bear all her troubles alone, not even let him know if anything went wrong. And smoking furiously Brandt tramped up and down his room picturing every possible evil that could befall her. Then, pulling himself together, remembered what she had said in regard to his dependability: looked back over the last seven years; during which he had been ready at her every beck and call; leaving his work at the most inopportune moment; allowing everything else to go to the wall, if Lu but needed him, ever so slightly. And at last, with the sudden amazement of the humble-minded man, realized that he had made himself too cheap; and determined, afresh, on a new course. The outcome of which was the following letter, that was handed to Miss Tempest, just as she left the breakfast-room next morning.

"DEAR LU,

"I'm off, up to the autumn ploughing. So long, old girl, let me know if there's anything you want. Love to the kids,

"Yours,

"M. BRANDT."



Lu turned the half sheet over rather dubiously, realizing the blank side with a sense of grievance; while the several young men, who surrounded her, glanced critically at the thin common paper and scrawly hand.

"Anything exciting, Miss Tempest?" ventured one.

"Well, if you aren't a nice lot;" Lu turned and regarded them scornfully. "Ten o'clock in the morning; and all the excitement you can hope for to be found in a woman's letter, or at the bottom of a deep-sinker."

"Oh, I say, Miss Tempest, don't rub it on. If you will be so awfully attractive you know——"

"You come up to Caufield with me at eleven o'clock and you'll see!" bragged another. "I've got a ripping pair of bays and I'm going to drive them tandem. Better come, there'll be some good racing and luncheon."

"I'll come if you'll let me drive."

"Oh—I don't know;" the boy hesitated, flushing crimson. "You see, they've never run together, like that, before."

"Oh! a'right:" and Lu moved towards the staircase, while the youth followed protesting.

"Of course you can if you like. I only meant—it's only that I thought they might be too much for you. I'd be only too honoured."

"No thanks, I've changed my mind; I'm going up to Beechleigh."

"But I can take you there after the races, it's only a mile or so further on. Come now, be a sport, Miss Tempest."

But Lu, raising the skirt of her muslin gown, was running upstairs two steps at a time, apparently quite oblivious, both of the youth and his words.

Four months dragged away, all too slowly for Brandt. Dark winter months for the most part, in which the short days drove him early from his work; leaving interminable evenings to be filled up as best he could. For Lu had been right in declaring that he was no reader.

However, the words which she had uttered, half laughingly, in regard to his dependability had taken root in a determination to let her be the first to break the silence; though he scanned the daily papers eagerly for news. Read that she was with Hawkins' company up in Sydney and in Brisbane; then back again in Melbourne staying at Menzies' Hotel—

which evidently meant that the boys were still in the country.

Then came the news that fresh plays were in rehearsal for the Cup week ; and a fortnight later the notice of a sale of all Miss Tempest's furniture and effects.

"What the devil is she up to now?" Martin wondered ; and tortured himself with the thought that she might be going to Europe. That perhaps Orde had sent for her, and that he would never see her again.

Then came an amazing telegram :

"Want six milch cows, no Alderneys. Same number of pigs, or sow with litter ; Berkshires. Wire price delivered at Manor Farm. Beechleigh : reference British Australasian Bank.—LU TEMPEST."

In his slow, deliberate way Brandt pored over this missive for two whole days. Turning it over in his mind, wondering what it meant. Suspecting a hoax and refusing to be caught. Drawing up his team, with which he was rolling the young wheat, to pull the pink paper from his pocket and scan it afresh, till it was rendered almost indistinguishable with much handling from earth-stained fingers.

At the end of the second day came another :

"Still sulking, eh ?—LU."

This last arrived just as Brandt was at the evening milking ; and wiping his hands on his dungarees he tore it open : read it through, slowly, then put it in his pocket : finished the cow he was at work upon, and rose to his feet.

"Reckon you've got to finish, Harvey. Eight o'clock to town. Frightfully sorry ; but important business, don't you know : " he muttered, half apologetically, to his mate, who lifted his head and stared. For the explanation seemed unnecessarily profuse to a man who rarely indulged in anything more than monosyllables ; while it was not till Brandt clattered out of the shed, in his heavy field boots, that he himself added to the clamour of tongues.

Then, thrusting forward his chin and nodding emphatically, he ejaculated the single word :—"Girl !" Spat with an air of great scorn, and again buried his head in the cow's side.

Finished the remaining eight or nine in silence, and, rising with a pail in either hand, repeated the same word, with a further addition of his own favourite adjective.

## CHAPTER XXXV

THE next morning Brandt entered the long dining-room at Menzies' Hotel ; and, having ascertained where Lu sat, seated himself at the same little table ; ordered his breakfast and sticking up the paper before him began to read ; absolutely regardless of the head waiter's anxious assurance that Miss Tempest preferred her own company at that particular meal.

" She'll be very late : " he insisted at length, finding Martin impervious to all his hints. " It was her farewell performance at the theatre last night ; and then there was a supper party. "

" I can wait : " Brandt's eyes were apparently fixed on his paper, but he had seated himself facing down the long room and could see everyone who entered.

The waiter had been right, Lu was very late ; deliberately so, for she was tired of all the fuss and talk with which she had been bombarded during the last few days, and counted on the breakfast-room being comparatively empty when she at last sailed in at half-past ten.

Martin Brandt's steady grey eyes watched her over the top of his paper, as she moved up the room ; but he did not lay it down until she halted opposite to him, and with one hand on the top of a chair, wished him :—" Good-morning. "

" It's the fashion to stand up when a lady addresses you : " she observed.

" Not in my world : " responded Martin coolly. " Nor in yours, if you're going back to the land. Are those six short-horns going to wait till ten-thirty to be milked, may I ask ? "

" Have you got them ? "

" Here in my pocket, of course ! " laughed Brandt. The last few months seemed wiped out. He was ridiculously, boyishly glad to see her ; as ready as ever to bully or be bullied.

Lu laughed, the clear spontaneous laugh which, to Brandt's mind, belonged to the early days of their friendship, when the

sound was at once rarer and more genuine than it had been during the last few years.

Even the waiter's wooden face relaxed a little at the sound ; and, as usual oblivious of all distinctions, Lu drew him into the conversation.

" He won't believe that I'm going to start farming, Frederick ; isn't it true ?"

" So I've heard, Miss."

" It must be true because it was in the *Herald* last night." Lu's eyes twinkled as she poured out her coffee. " Of course they're all outraged that any actress should leave the stage except for matrimony ; and sniffing the air for scandal. But there it is—and now what about those cows ?"

" Look here, Lu ! Is it true ? Or is it a sort of glorified advertisement, that you and Hawkins have concocted between you ?"

" Hawkins ! My dear, if you could have seen and heard him ! Go and ask if you have the courage to face him. The funny part of it all is, that for ages he's half wished me dead, between the fear of my being decoyed away by some rival, and the pain and grief of pay day. But now you would think his whole life depended on me."

" You're giving it up altogether—your dancing ; that you were so set on ?"

" No—I shall dance, to the day of my death, I believe ; but no one will pay to see me. I'm—look here Martin, I'm fed up with it all. It's not the art of the thing, it's the people it brings about you : things that happen. The selling of oneself ; the everlasting pretence."

" Not much pretence about you, my girl."

" Wasn't there though—the pretence that there was no pretending ; that nothing ever touched or hurt me. If I'd dared to be a little less common ; a little more human they'd have said that I was losing my " distinctive style : " Lu drawled out the two last words with superb mimicry. " What did they call me ? ' The boy-woman : ' ' The cold Miss Tempest : ' ' The soulless dancer.' Though, for the most part, they don't even know the meaning of the word. And there was I—bound to be, what the soft goods men term, ' true to sample.' They wouldn't even remember David—excepting the few men who chose to flatter themselves that a woman who has once



'fallen,' as they call it, is fair game for any of them. A dancer that belonged to herself alone was a novelty ; a sort o' sherry and bitters. Then there were other things. You know that girl I had as dresser—Mary ?"

Brandt nodded.

"Well, she's gone and got herself into trouble—what a damnable phrase for the one saving consequence ! I've sent her back to her own people, and am paying all her expenses. It's the least I could do. It was on my conscience—seemed sort of way my fault :"

Lu's voice broke with a jarring note of complete weariness.

"That's nonsense ! Everyone knows what you are, in that way anyhow."

"Not that class ; they believe that there can be but one interest between a man and a woman. She said she was led into it ; that I was always about with a lot of men—didn't realize the safety of there being a lot—took presents from them, had a good time. Not blaming me mind you, in spite of all that she thought ; but as if I was something wonderful. Then—poor silly fool, oozing with sentiment—thought as how she could do the same, and keep clear. Never remembering that I had paid the price already. If I'd ever failed in any single thing to her mind ; even seemed a little frightened, she'd have taken warning. You see she didn't think—didn't believe for a moment that there was nothing in it all. She had no ambition, no anything. She was the sort that's not got the wits to talk—to amuse, be on any other terms with men ; to think of anything outside sex. She reckoned that I was just clever, that she could be the same. Look here, Brandt !" with a fierce gesture, as if something hurt her, Lu brought one hand down on the table : "if I'd been an out-and-out rotter, I'd have done less harm ; people 'ud seen for themselves, been frightened away. But as it is everything—except what I feel for the boys—has grown to a sort of poison. Why, even with Julian—Julian whom I love—the thought has always been that I'd make him proud of me ! Make him see that other men wanted me ; let him know what he had lost all these years, then forgive him. There was a girl in the hospital with me when Dave was born. Do you remember a woman coming out of an hotel half drunk and running into me, the night we went to the gardens ? Well, that was the one—

the same age as I am, and she might be fifty to look at her ; I found her out ; I've done all I could. But it's hopeless, she's rotten through with drink, and every sort of horror. And what do you think she said ? That she remembered me, had seen me climbup—seen the sort of time I had—just like Mary! and tried to do the same, with too much heart and too little wits."

" Well, anyhow it was not your fault."

" You say that. But you know different. I'd have been better if I'd been worse. It seems to me that the worst sort of sin in the world is to let people believe the wrong thing : not to remember the fools." Lu's elbows were on the table, her chin resting on her hands ; while her face was pale, curiously softened by faint lines, her eyes dim with pain.

" Woman, you mustn't let yourself think like that. It's simply morbid ; it does no good to anybody."

" I know it doesn't pay. If one once started thinking the distance every ball one set rolling might go to, it would drive one crazy. Why, even to think of David and Hugh, and not only them even, but their children and children's children. Anyhow I'm through with it all. The life at the Mackensie's was brutal enough, but it was real ; people lived like beasts, but they took the consequences. Then the MacIrvine's—they're as narrow as narrow, but they're real too. Do you remember what quiet eyes old MacIrvine has ? That's the sort of old man I'd like Dave to be—that's the sort of life he needs : hard work early and late : and heavy sleep, and the open air. For he's got a fever in his veins the same as Julian. And Hugh—do you remember Bertie's face in the morning, all puffy, an' the way his hand shook ; and Daisy. What a father and mother ! It seems we're all sort o' tainted ; we all want healing."

" And now what is it to be : " Lu's expression was so sombre, the old brooding expression of her childhood, that Brandt felt it was time to draw her away from the past :—" What about the cows, and the six pigs—and why Berkshires ?"

" They don't show the dirt : " with that quick movement of the shoulders, which always meant a mental and physical bracing of her energies, a return to practical affairs. Lu rose to her feet. " Come into the lounge, and let's talk it over. I've bought the farm next to the MacIrvine's ; a hundred and

twenty acres, house, outbuildings and implements. A deposit, and the rest in rent for twenty years. But it's got to be made to pay ; an' it's got to be stocked."

"Gosh, but you've settled everything : how long has all this been brewing, I'd like to know ?"

"I saw the farm, and wanted it. I'd been up at Beechleigh a lot lately ; and I was sick of the stage. Then—just the very day I was to sign my fresh contract for the summer months—phut ! the two thoughts came together ; and I turned down Hawkins and set my lawyer on to the farm straight away. You go along to the lounge now ; and I'll run upstairs for my cigarettes and the plans."

## PART IV





## CHAPTER XXXVI

THE autumn wind was blowing from the sea ; wet and salt on the lips, piling up clouds in feathery masses above the deep indigo of the Dandenong Ranges ; filling the lowlands—which lay between Beechleigh and the shore—with a driving mist.

Up the northern slope two double-furrow ploughs cut their way ; with four horses, overhung by a cloud of steam, straining at each. For though the ground was loamy the heather growth and thick tussocky grass choked the blades.

One plough reached the top before the other, and the boy who guided it turned and waved and shouted at his companion ; a grotesque, squat figure of a man who, bending over the handles, appeared all shoulders, head and feet—pigeontoed and shod in high, heavy boots.

At last he also reached the top and gave a hoarse cry of triumph, then rounded his hand to his mouth and shouted :—

“ It’s straighter than yours ! ”

“ Yes ! ” hollowed the boy ; and grinned tolerantly, for the little man’s furrow was like the track of an earth-worm, incredibly wavy, and of every sort of depth. But Cheiko was something between the butt, the spoiled child and the philosopher of the family : had been ever since he followed Lu to the farm. He perceived everything in the large, like a child ; with queer flashes of insight ; while—though his solemnity was as pretentious as that of an infant—his folly was pregnant with wisdom : he knew so much more of some things even than Brandt—who was the boy’s idol ; and of other things far less than David.

It pleased him to believe that his furrow was the straightest, and it did not hurt Hugh, who deliberately bungled over the turning of his plough, drawing back his fretted team so that the other might start first.

Then again he waited, for a woman in a blue gown was coming up the hill and signed that he should stay till she joined him.

It was Lu, and she breasted the rise bravely, without stopping ; her back straight, her head held high. Four years had passed, since she had gone back to the land ; to the life which she at once hated and yet loved—with an unwilling sort of love, because it was part of herself—and the years had given her much : a depth of chest and width of shoulder ; a look of completeness and strength ; while—though her face was lined with long hours of work and care, her skin roughened by wind and sun—her strange beauty still held. Topping the hill, she turned as Hugh had done : and looked back with her hand upon the boy's shoulder, her blue skirts blown tight round her back and flying out before her ; waved gaily to Cheiko ; then followed the narrow strip of soil with her eye.

“ It's a fine clean cut ; well done, my son ! ”

Hugh bent his head and rubbed his cheek caressingly against her hand ; then tossed it to shake back the lock of dark hair, which still dangled across his forehead.

“ Not so bad.”

With a deep breath Lu drew herself upright and gazed across the valley of mist to the sea. It was the same breath as she had once been used to take before starting to dance. But nowadays all her dancing was inward, a spirit of rhythm and movement, showing itself only in the way she walked, in the movement of her hands ; for she seldom practised any of her old steps, unless it was in the lamplit kitchen at night to amuse the boys.

Her glance ranged round to the hollow where Melbourne lay—the scene of her brief, unsatisfying triumph, of shallow gaiety, and deep pain—turned to the blue mountains, the wide green country, the white-starred heath land, sparkling with moisture ; then concentrated again on the narrow strip of brown soil at her feet, following its length till it culminated in a rough, fern-grown bank, at the farther side of which lay a green meadow, where some cows grazed ; and beyond that the cluster of buildings and stacks which represented her home.

Stooping she laid her hand on the brown earth with a caressing gesture, and a clucking sound, such as a mother might make to her child.

"I feel sort of savage with it ; I like to tear and hurt it—and yet I love it, and everything that it means. It's like one's own child : " she said. Then with a sudden return to the practical ; laughed, and added :—"Ten good acres, think what it will mean in lucerne !"

"Yes : " Hugh's tone was detached, his eyes narrowed, as if with some effort of thought, which Lu, who knew the boy so well, realized had shot on far before her and the freshly-cut furrow.

"What is it—what are you reaching forward to now ? " she asked with a note of irritation in her voice. "It's given you everything—health and strength and new life—and you hate the town as much as I do. What is it you want ?"

"I am happy—I don't want the town : I want— It's so hard to explain ! I want this, but I want something with, and beyond it all : " he made a vague gesture with his hand. "I don't know what or how. I love it as much as you do, but not in the same way. With you it's the end ; with me"—he laughed, with boyish awkwardness, while his pale face flushed—"it seems the means towards other things. As if I must do more than plough and sow ; as if the breaking of the new soil meant more than any crop of lucerne. I want—I feel as if something drives me—to put the meaning of it all into shape. I feel—it sounds such rot, such swank ! But I feel as if I wanted to write about it ; to make other people see it all—feel it as I do. That it all has a meaning ; is shot through and through with it. That the meaning runs to words—and a sort of tune. You are not angry with me, Lu. I can't explain—I love to cut a straight furrow in fresh ground. But it's not the thing itself : it's something I feel about it."

"How can I be angry ? I know the feeling too well myself. It seems that one's sort o' born twice—and it's the second birth that hurts ; an' no one can't not help you with it, and nothing nobody can give will satisfy you. If you feel like that about writing : and feel it fierce and strong, and long enough, you'll write. And then——" Lu's eyes held their old sombre, brooding look as she gazed across her little domain ; "you'll turn round and ask yourself : "Is this all ? And start all over again—if you've got the grit—or else go under. But now——"



"Now there's the ploughing. Look Cheiko's half-way up again, grinning fit to split himself."

"Give me the handles."

"It's too heavy for you."

"What! Am I so weak and old as all that? Gee up, Trumpeter— Steady, Bob." Lu shook the reins, leant her weight sideways on the handles of the plough; one knee bent the other straight, with every muscle taut: and pressing forward swung it round; turned her team, and started off steadily down the slope.

An hour later she was milking in the fast gathering dusk when she heard a voice calling her:—

"Mother, Mother, Mother!" and knew that it was David, back from school: for though Hugh loved her like a son he never gave her the name belonging by right to poor little Daisy, who had unexpectedly married a small draper in a provincial English town, and—after three years of wedded bliss—was still striving for courage to tell her immaculate husband of the boy's existence.

David knew well enough where he would find her at that hour; but he always began to shout the moment he was within hearing of the house; and usually Lu neither stirred nor answered—for she liked to hear him calling in that way—till he poked his rough head and rosy face into the shed door.

But to-day there was something so insistent in his voice, that at the third call she answered him; and the next moment the boy was by her side, vibrating with impatience.

"Mother, you must come! There's someone to see you—a strange man."

"The man about the calves." It seemed to Lu that nothing would ever cure her of that leaping heart over the approach of any unexpected visitor. Day after day she had watched the white road from the station, in a fever at the sight of some figure which showed in the distance: was lost behind a curve: reappeared and grew larger and larger: leaving her with a sense of flatness and chill, as it at last took the definite form of some complete stranger.

It was all such folly. It had been the same in her old dancing days. She had never even bought a new frock without hoarding it unworn for weeks, lest Orde should return. But there had been more people in her life then, and it was

impossible to watch a maze of crowded streets as she watched that solitary winding road.

Lately she had got into the habit of inventing some probable and prosaic excuse for the appearance of any unexpected person.

"It's the man about the calves. I've been expecting him—had them penned up all day. It 'ull be night afore——"

"It's not that man. It's—oh, you'll see! It's someone quite different : he says he knew you ages and ages ago."

"It's Brandt," declared Lu stolidly, though her pulses bounded at the boy's words.

"What rot! as if I shouldn't know Martin Brandt!" shouted David scornfully ; and beat with his fists on the rail of the pen.

"Stop milking—stop it! stop it, I say! Are you never excited, wild, mad about anything? It might be anyone. It might be my father, mine—for all you care. Milking, milking, milking : rotten, beastly milking! Nothing but milking!"

"David ; how dare you?" Lu rose and confronted her son, who half turned, kicking angrily against the boards.

"It's a stranger, I tell you—he's been all over the world, seen everything. He was asking at the station where you lived. I thought you'd be awfully glad," his excited voice caught in a sob of disappointment, "an' now——"

"Where is he?"

"On the veranda."

"Show him into the kitchen and light the lamp. I have to milk Patty, then I'll come."

"You don't care!"

"Do as you're told."

It was seldom that Lu used such a tone to her idolized son ; but when she did he knew that he must obey, and so swung off in a huff ; while his mother, raising her pail and stool, moved on to the last cow.

It was what she had been waiting for, during twelve long years.

She knew what men were. The number of affairs there had been in Orde's life, indeed he had never made a secret of them. But, for all that she never doubted that there was something

in the strength and persistence of her love which would draw him back to her.

She had thought that she might meet him in the street, catch sight of a cab, laden with luggage, and his face peering from the window. See him in the stalls, one night while she danced—as the white and pink Columbine ; the grey bird ; or the butterfly, with great mottled wings and quivering antennæ. Then later she had dreamt of how she might see him breast the windy height, as she drove the cows home in the dewy dusk, and how she would run, and he would run—both with open arms like children—and meet and clasp.

For twelve long years. And yet here was she waiting to milk the last cow ; while David lit the lamp in the kitchen, offered the stranger a chair.

Was it true that, as the boy said, she was past all excitement, had waited too long, had lost the faculty of being stirred ? She was as much appalled at her own lack of feeling as she had been when she heard Orde clatter down the stone staircase, years ago in that barrack of a building where they had parted.

But as she rose from Patty's side she realized that she was cold from head to foot, torn with emotion so that her limbs felt stiff and cold, while her brain was numbed out of all thought.

To rush and meet him, to feel his arms round her, to melt at the warm fire of his love : it was all she desired. But she crossed the yard slowly with her heavy buckets : emptied them carefully into the pans on the dairy shelf ; then drew herself upright with a long shuddering sigh ; and stood for a few moments in the cool, quiet place, as if to gather her strength together, before opening a side door, passing down a short passage and entering the kitchen.

David was seated facing towards her ; his elbows leaning on the table, his face glowing with excitement, his brown eyes moist and shining.

"And then—" he breathed : "after they let loose the panther ?"

How well Lu remembered that story ! How often she and Harold had shuddered over it during that first winter in the forest ! Once more she saw the whole thing, as it had come

to her then, in a flash. The old man and his daughter, and Orde ; the band of desperadoes, the rearing, snorting horses ; and the black panther—the keynote of the whole scene—cut out like a silhouette against the hard blue sky, the blinding cloud of sand, the distorted cactus bushes, with their red and yellow blossoms.

“ Don’t interrupt, Mother ! ” The boy caught sight of her and raised an imperative hand. “ It’s such a bully story. The panther—— ”

But the man sitting with his back to her had risen, swung round and caught both her hands in his.

“ Lu ! is it really you—Lu ? The child I left, the Diana of the woods ! Grown to a woman, and such a woman ! Little Lu the housewife, the mother-child. I’ve heard great things of you, you and your dancing, Lu. With what pride I’ve thought—that is my little friend, my comrade of the Ranges. What days they were ! How sad, how mad, how bad, but oh, how sweet.” The soft rounded sentences flowed impetuously forth, Orde’s face glowed with all its old fervour ; and across the table, on a level with the lamp, Lu caught sight of David’s mobile countenance, illumined with the same ardour ; his eyes fixed on the stranger, his crest of chestnut hair pushed back from his forehead. “ I only landed a fortnight ago—I was up in Sydney—but I could not rest without seeing you. I expected to find you still on the stage : I must have heard, but I forgot—one does forget—— ” his voice held the old peevish note. “ I always envied you your memory. It seems a pity that you should have left it all—when you were doing so well, already almost famous. And to think that I was the first to recognize your capacity—your talent, crude as it was in those days. At least I did that much for you—started you in life.”

“ Yes,” said Lu slowly, “ you started me in life.” Her eyes rested on Orde with a sudden sense of new vision. As he moved across to the hearth, she saw that he walked with a slight limp, as if twisted by some internal malady. His eyes were as brilliant as ever, but they had lost that boyish look which they wore in the old days ; while his skin was ashy, with deep vertical furrows at either side of his mouth.

But it was not the extraordinary havoc of the years which caused Lu to look at him with new eyes, for that was the one



thing which drew her to him—made its claim upon her affection ; but the sudden realization that the man she had endowed with such heroic qualities, half worshipped all these years, had never really existed : that Brandt had spoken truly in telling her that she was in love with the idea of the man : not with the man himself.

Later on she modified this opinion : half argued herself out of it : but in the first flash she realized the truth as it was. She had been in love with a Julian Orde of her own creation, or with what he had believed himself to be.

" Had we never loved so madly," began Orde, with his old inveterate trick of quotation : then shifted his gaze beneath Lu's eyes, moved across the room and leant one elbow on the mantelshelf : glanced down at his feet and gave an exclamation of surprise. " What ! you've actually got the old rug ?"

" Yes." By some chance Lu had caught sight of it in an old curio shop in town, and bought it with a glow of passionate delight at the possession. David had learnt to walk, toddling across it from his chair to her bedside, in the little Charlton villa : to love the leaping hares upon the crimson border, the snake and the magic fruit-trees, just as she had done ; for in those early days the child reflected her every like and dislike, her every emotion.

" It's a good thing ;" remarked Orde : " I sold it to a fellow named Harbin, when I left, for fifteen pounds. You found it——"

" In a second-hand shop——"

" Ah— Well ! that's the sort of end we all come to, scrapped with the rubbish !" and he sighed, his head sunk upon his breast ; while a curious silence fell upon the little group.

Suddenly David pushed back his chair—with a scraping sound across the brick floor—and running over to Orde hung coaxingly to his arm.

" Go on with your story. When they let the panther loose——" he prompted, rubbing his face against the man's arm : " did it kill Pedro ?"

But Orde returned no answer. For a moment his eyes, narrowed with an effort of intense thought, were fixed on the boy's face ; then raised to a strip of looking-glass which hung on the wall opposite. Finally, holding David a little away

from him with one hand, he again gazed at him intently, as if in the endeavour to read something at the back of the bright sanguine countenance ; turned and confronted Lu : raised his brows, opened his mouth as if to speak ; then thrust his hands deep into his pockets and began tramping up and down the room, his left foot dragging with a scraping sound on the brick floor.

" Send the boy away, I must talk to you."

A sudden stubbornness took Lu:—" He is well enough where he is ; let him stay ; finish the story. I must get supper ready ; Mrs. Platt, my friend and housekeeper, is in town."

" I must speak to you : I must know what it means." Orde spoke with fretful impatience. " I must know, I tell you ! Supper—what is supper ?"

" Everything to a hungry man and boy."

" Oh, there is a man, is there ?" Orde's tone was significant. But without replying Lu took the kettle, and going out to the pump, filled it, and put it on the fire ; set plates and knives and cold meat on the table ; all as though in a dream. Then, as she broke some eggs into the frying-pan, heard Cheiko and Hugh cross the yard, enter the back kitchen, and pass to their rooms : with a strange sensation as though it was the first real-life sound which had struck on her ears for an eternity.

" There is another boy of fifteen, a playmate of—my son's ;" she held her head erect as she spoke, while the last two words were pitched in a higher key than the others. " And a friend who helps me with the farm."

" Perhaps I shall find myself *de trop*," suggested Orde with a sneer.

" I don't understand foreign talk !" Lu's cheeks flamed. She had heard the words often enough in the old stage days, and recognized their ugly significance. But she determined to let them pass ; merely showing her displeasure by her next words—which—to her own amazement—set a definite limit to Orde's visit. " Of course you will stay to supper—and after that one of the boys will see you to the station."

It seemed as if the world must come to an end with such words to this man, whose coming she had been awaiting for years : who had possessed her literally body and soul.

But as the other two entered the room her voice ran on smoothly, apparently without her own volition.

"This is Hugh Buxton ; and this is Cheiko : " she slipped her hand into the little man's arm, with a sudden sense of clinging to him ; of being glad of his quaint, familiar presence, then added :—" Cheiko and I used to dance together, before I left the stage."

The introduction was one-sided. To save her life Lu could not have brought herself to pronounce Orde's name. For the third or fourth time she was mechanically counting out the knives and forks upon the table ; and, at that moment, the only thing which seemed to matter to her benumbed brain was the fact that there were the same number as usual ; and yet a stranger was present. Then, with a sudden, hysterical desire to laugh or cry, she realized that she had forgotten to count herself : that all the others in the room seemed to be playing some game, or acting some part, for which she merely set the scene.

Orde, fingering his mouth and chin in the old fashion, leant against the mantelshelf without speaking ; merely acknowledging the introduction with a bow ; while David alone sustained the conversation : balancing himself upon the fender, with the help of Orde's arm, swinging to and fro upon one foot, and recounting to the newcomers how he had met the stranger : all the wonders of which he had been told ; and—almost word for word—the first instalment of the famous panther story, his eyes shining with excitement ; while from time to time the man looked down at him—breaking his silence to correct some word or phrase, with a curious air of possessive pride.

Once only did he glance across the room, with a look of intolerant dislike at the others, who had seated themselves stiffly, side by side, on two chairs. Noted Cheiko's quaint face, and distorted figure, attired in the rough clothes and heavy, mud-coated boots of a ploughman ; and Hugh, with his pale oval face and high forehead, crossed by that black lock of hair ; one long finger between the pages of the book which he had held in his hand when he entered.

Behind them was the open outer door ; a pale, lemon-tinted sky and crescent moon. To Orde's impatient eyes the man and boy appeared to be mechanically set against this background ; as far removed from people in real life as the figures

in some old Florentine mural painting, laid on with flat, dull washes. What had Lu been thinking of to surround herself with such people ?

## CHAPTER XXXVII

It was a relief when the meal was ready. A still greater one when it was at last ended, and the man and elder boy went off to see to the horses.

"Send that child to bed now : I must speak to you alone." Orde spoke curtly : oppressed even by David's presence. "Send him off, I say :" he repeated. But the boy, cut to the quick, needed no second dismissal. "That child," indeed ! It was all his mother's fault ; she treated him like a baby and others took their cue from her.

As the door closed behind the haughty little figure, Orde leant forward in his chair with an exclamation of relief ; his hands clasping the arms, his feverish eyes searching Lu's face.

"Now, I want you to tell me—to hear what I know already. He is mine—mine ? My son."

For years Lu had longed for these very words. But now she resented them. The possessive tone in which they were uttered : even the note of pride, which she had once been so anxious to hear. A spirit of evasion seized her, and she confronted Orde with a stare.

"What right have you to say that ?"

The man laughed. "My dear child, one has only to look at him. It's I, myself, through the wrong end of a telescope. I, myself, in the little. Of course I know that I was not the only one ; there is a certain artistic latitude allowed ; and even before my time—— But the boy is unmistakeable, you must realize that !"

"Realize what ? you always believed, still believe the worst of me. Why should you fancy he is yours any more than any other man's ?"

"Fancy ! There's no fancy there. My God ! I nearly dropped when I realized it. It all seemed so far away, so much an ideal of the wood and forests."

"It was not all ideal for me," replied Lu drily. A sudden



nauseating memory of Mother Alldyce's swept across her mind, of that never to be forgotten first night at the hospital. "Besides—supposing what you say is true—what can he have to do with you? You had gone away and forgotten. It's I who have lived and worked, and suffered for him. You're a strange man, from Heaven knows where: with strange ways, nothing to do with the likes of us."

"But you have had him all these years, knowing that he was ours, the symbol of our love! Seen him grow: felt his soft arms round your neck; his lips upon yours." The florid phrases ran smoothly from Orde's lips. "And for me what has there been? A man's part in the world. The lonely way—

" ' My mistress still the open road,  
And the bright eye of danger.' "

For a moment he hesitated in the face of Lu's persistent silence, then went on. "But this makes all the difference. If you had written, told me, I should have been horrified—for you. But now, Lu! I can never tell you what it means to me now. It's like a new lease of life. My son—our son! After all these years, years which it seemed that the locust had eaten—years of vain endeavour. And all the time *this* waiting for me. My son—bone of my bone."

For the first time that night it seemed to Lu, watching him with blank, tired eyes, that something like bottom was touched in the shifting morass of the man's character; and half hoped that it was she who had been mistaken; though Orde's next words stirred up, afresh, that curious sense of antagonism, which had leapt into life the moment she saw him lay his hand on David's shoulder.

"It is the real thing!" he went on ardently. "The real thing. What I have been looking for, longing for all my life. What I once thought I had found in that little brother of yours; little—little——" he hesitated, evidently at a loss for the name, then went on. "We thought we had found it in the forest, Lu. But it was something different, quite different. By God, it looks as if fate had played a trick on me and my unbelief. Paternal love! What I could have sworn was nothing more than a conventional lie, invented for the convenience of civilization. But there it is. And now I've found

my son, by God I'll stick to him ! Acknowledge him, make a man of him, teach him——"

"Look here!" Lu's voice broke harshly through the smooth flow of words. "I'll tell you straight, I don't not want your teaching. For twelve years I've worked for him and taught him. Sweated for him—it's a dirty word ; but the meaning's clean. I've made him what he is. He's honest and straight, and he believes in things. I won't have him taught by you. Do you hear me ? I won't have it ! Your teaching's all taking away, not giving. The boy's mine. Mine through and through. You shan't not warp him and starve him, as you warped and starved me ; an' God only knows how many since my time, sapping their life out of them—sucking them dry."

Lu paused, half for breath, half to give Orde time for the outburst of anger against which she mentally stiffened herself. But to her surprise his manner was sullen and subdued. Almost pleading.

"He's my son, nothing will alter that—mine as well as yours."

"There you're wrong. As far as you are concerned he's the merest chance. You hadn't never desired him. You might have had many such sons. You told me enough of your life, in the old days, to make that plain ; though it's only now as I realize it. And you, Julian Orde, to come to me and yap about the paternal feeling. *You* to me—to me ! I who carried the child beneath my heart and fed it with my life and suffered the pains of the damned for it—while you knew nothing." For a moment Lu paused, her green eyes blazing ; then broke forth again in a flood of words. "Mothering ain't a matter of soft arms and kisses. It's being hard when you want to be soft ; an' sleepless nights an' never ending patience. Paternal love !" and she laughed harshly : "the world lies when it talks of paternal love. It talks with men's mouths not with women's. Do you think that the women don't know—even the wives, that it's all lies and pretence. But they pretend too ; because they depend on the men for their living : share their children with them as the price of it—poor wretches ! I'm free of all that—though I never knew before how much I had to be thankful for. I can work for myself and the child—give him all he needs. There's no need for

pretence. He's mine before all the world. Even your world—the man's world—still takes my word before yours. Gives you nothing. Do you hear me? Nothing! I've paid the price and he's mine. Swear to him as you would, no one 'ud heed you."

"What do you mean? You're mad; you can't alter——"

"What do I mean? I mean this. That you did not care to give me your name, or the pretence of your name; or your protection, or your care. And now the world you talk of—it's brutal enough in general, but it's right in this—gives you no claim over my son. Mine—except for what I choose to allow. I paid for him with loneliness and shame, and he's mine. Do you hear me, Julian Orde—he's mine, altogether mine. You've jumped other claims, you'll not jump this: it was bought and paid for afore the child ever saw light. And the farm's mine: and the house is mine:" she went on passionately: "and we're enough for ourselves. We've no place for the likes of you—we're workers, not talkers here. We're beholden to you for nothing;" her voice twanged, harshly and crudely. "If it's your twenty pounds you want, it's in the bank: I've sweated for all I've earned; sweated blood to pay the debt of your ideal."

Orde made a gesture of disgust:—

"How can you say—think, such things? The unspeakable vulgarity, the commonness of bringing love down——"

"That's what we are—common, thank God. I and my son, and my friends: common as the earth—you'd muck your hand touching us. This is the kitchen you're in now. It's not the place for a gentleman. Besides" and she swung round towards the door: "it's late, you must go."

"I can't! you've no right to turn me out." Orde sat down heavily and leant over his folded arms upon the table: looking up at Lu: the full glare of the lamp on his haggard face. "I can't—I'm not fit to knock about; then there's the boy." His voice was sullen: but for all that it held something of entreaty.

"The boy's mine—he's nothing to you: you've no call to name him."

"You never loved me."

"You're right. But I've loved what I thought was you, through all these years—till to-night."

"And now, because I'm old and changed——" Orde's voice was bitter.

"No : I made a mistake, that's all. It's not that you are changed—you are what you always were."

"The boy's mine :—" Orde repeated the words with the obstinate reiteration of a man who knows that he is without proofs.

"That remains to be seen, but meanwhile the house is mine, and you must go : I'll have no strange men here o' nights." Lu's crude words expressed all the awkward primness of her class.

"A sudden access of virtue !"

"Will you go—or must I call someone to put you out, Julian Orde ? For I tell you that I'll have no more of you : I'll live my life straight and clean as I've done these twelve years past ! Then because of you—and now because of you :—" with both hands on the table she leant towards him, regarding him coldly ; the unshaded lamp shining on the strong, rounded pillar of her throat, the firm chin and sunburned arms : "I thought that there was one man different and gave all the others the go-by because of him. Now I know there's none different, an' I'm cured o' love, once an' for all."

With a sudden sense of panic Orde caught her wrists in his moist hands : she was so strong and wholesome, he must have something to hold, to lean on. It was impossible that he should allow himself to be banished.

"Once I could have forced you to all I wished :—" his smile and voice held something of the old, deliberate charm. "Little Lu !—who could have thought that you would have grown so hard—so cruel. Is there nothing of the past to hold you—Diana."

"You must go." Lu spoke more gently, for something in the touch of the limp hand moved her.

"I can't go. Did you ever read Ibsen's 'Wild Duck' ?—It's like that ; my wing's broken. Look here, this is all—all I've got : my only chance."

"What do you mean ?"

"The boy and his youth. I want an interest in life—something. I've lived too long with a decaying world, flaccid, bloodless people, sapped by a pretence of life. It's all nerves,



neuralgic pains ; nerves will do anything—I make no appeal to your pity. It's nonsense what the doctors say. Rank folly. They must say something. It's what they're paid for. But, by God ! if they were right, if that's what's the matter with me——” Orde paused, his face ashen. “ Of course I'm ill,” he added peevishly :—“ Is it any wonder if my nerves have all gone to pieces.”

“ He swears by God now, not by the gods,” thought Lu : “ he's frightened at something.” For in her experience The Name was a signal of anger or despair. “ You must tell me what it is. I will help you if I can ; believe me, I'll help you.” She spoke gently and tolerantly.

“ No—what's the good of repeating a lie :” replied Orde testily ; and rising to his feet, he began to move up and down the room with dragging steps, picking up trifles, in a detached sort of way, looking at them and putting them down again. “ But you must let me stay. I'm at the end of things. The bottom seems out of my world. I could stand that deadly climate no longer : the cold eat into my bones, I felt that I should grow mouldy. No wonder I was ill, everyone's ill in England—Phaugh ! it smells of decay ! I came out here—I came to you, Lu——” he stretched out his hands with a gesture of entreaty.

“ A month after you landed.”

“ Yes—only a month after I landed ! Isn't that a proof that I had not forgotten you ? It was not my fault that I didn't know of the child—you should have told me ; it was infamous not to have told me !” his voice broke peevishly. “ And now you can't turn me out ; there's that between us.”

“ You can't stay here—I don't choose to have people talk of me :” Lu flushed as her mind leapt to Brandt.

“ Ye fates what a change ! Lu of the Ranges and Mrs. Grundy !”

“ Come, I'll put you on the way to the station.”

“ Lu, I can't go !” Suddenly Orde's pretentious dignity and scorn slipped from him. His face was distorted like that of a weeping child ; while he clung to Lu's arm ; pulling back her hands from a cloak she was reaching off a peg. “ I'm done for. I'll do no harm to the boy, I'll never tell him. I'll only teach him what you want me to. But I won't submit to be driven away—Lu ! you mustn't turn me out !” The

tears were streaming down his face as he spoke. " Good God how can you be so cold, so brutal after all there has been—is between us ? Look here, I'll tell you, humiliate myself to you. I've come to the end of everything : let things slide : been too good to people : never thought of myself. And now I'm ill—it's nothing, I'll be well in a month—but I want care, affection."

" Do you mean you have no money ?" asked Lu bluntly, her mind leaping to the practical point in Orde's hysterical outburst. As for being ill, even in his most heroic days, she had known him to weep over a cut finger.

With a short laugh he plunged his hands into his pockets and brought out some coppers and a few odd pieces of silver. " Who steals my purse steals trash : " he said and laughed again, with a catching sob in his voice.

" There's that twenty pounds still in the bank : it will be more now—after twelve years." Lu spoke dryly.

" How long would that last me ? I must have good food, care, comfort."

" Then work for it : pay for your footing in the world. There's things enough that you can do if you only stick to them—quit foolin'."

" I can't work."

" Why not ?"

" I can't : " for a moment Orde hesitated ; then caught at her arm : drew her to him and whispered, with a strange air, almost of triumph.

Lu's face bleached as she drew back.

" No !" and stared at him in horror : " it's not true ?"

" They say it is : " Orde shrugged his shoulders.

" It's not true !" Lu spoke loudly and harshly, as if arguing against her own convictions, drew back the bolt of the door and flung it open. " It's a trick—to play on me—to take me in again. To start feeding on my life, as you fed on it before. But I won't have it—I'll not be fooled a second time. You can go—go now. I didn't want never to hear of you, to see you again. I'd have had more left in life if you'd never come back. You've robbed me of even that—of the love, and the memory of you. But now I'm free."

" Lu ; it is true—I try to believe it is not. I tell myself it's not ; but it is. Good God, shouldn't I know it's true,

with the knowledge eating into me day by day? All my courage is gone. I'm frightened of the world. It seems all eyes. I want home and quiet : I want to be near you and the boy."

"All these years you've never thought of me."

"That's not true—I remembered. It was the most perfect thing in my life."

"Something to rhyme to, put to verse. And at last to come back to—when all else was at an end."

"It won't be for long." Lu was standing in the open by now ; but Orde clung to the lintel of the door, turning his head and gazing longingly at the homely little kitchen, with its bricked floor; the crude lamplight, the deep red glow of the logs.

Suddenly, catching sight of the emaciated line of jaw and chin, the conviction came to Lu that—whether he really believed it or not—Orde had spoken truly. That it was indeed, not for long ; that he had suffered terribly, would suffer more ; was dying. And with a strange feeling, as if she was taking up the whole burden of life afresh, she moved towards him and put her hand on his shoulder.

"Go inside, you shall stay : " she said. Flung a fresh log on to the fire and stirred it to a blaze ; then pulled a low chair forward. "Sit down there. I will heat you some milk, and you can drink it while I make your room ready."

For once bereft of all words Orde obeyed in silence. But as Lu stooped to place a cushion to his back he caught at her arm, and leaning his face sideways against her breast began to cry again, weak tears of passionate self pity : while she seated herself on the arm of his chair, rocking him gently to and fro, as though he were a child, smoothing his hair, and holding him to her, with one strong arm flung round his heaving shoulders. Gazing meanwhile into the flames with a set face, remembering how—many years before—she had rocked and soothed Harold, on the veranda at the Mackensie's : seeing again the dirty, untidy yard, the mean buildings, the sweep of sun-bleached plain and skeleton trees.

As if Orde had, indeed, been a child, she made him drink his hot milk, saw to his comfort : even let him pull her down to him and kiss her good-night, while she tucked the clothes about him when he was at last safely in bed.

"There is only one thing I ask of you," she said. "That

you tell nobody ; let alone David. As long as you don't do that, you can stay here. You shall see a good doctor to-morrow. I'll care for you, do all that lies in my power for you : but only on that condition."

" I swear I won't tell him—I swear it, Lu ! But people will guess, will talk."

" Let them talk as they will—they can never say anything for certain." Lu spoke bravely : but for all that her heart sank.

The security and peace, the friendly respect of the homely country people had been very dear to her : besides it all meant more lying, a new burden of pretence. However there it was : it had got to be borne, and as long as Orde was well and dependent, in his present docile mood, it was bearable. But it would not last, as Lu only too well knew ; for if there was one lesson that the world had taught her most thoroughly it was that nobody ever really does change. That, with time, they may become a little better or a little worse, but that the bed rock of their character remains unaltered.

## CHAPTER XXXVIII

NEXT morning Lu telegraphed to town and made an appointment with the most eminent surgeon. For though Orde's spirits had revived with his sense of security, she realized how ill he was and determined to know the exact nature of his complaint.

With Lu his docility still held ; but with the rest of the household that old curious mixture of grandiloquence and boyish arrogance had already begun to assert itself, and somehow he got his own way in all he desired ; David being kept back from school because he wished it—and Lu did not like even to appear to distrust his word regarding the boy—sitting on the edge of the sick man's bed, listening to incredible tales.

Indeed the whole arrangement of the little house was disorganized. Lu had given up her own room the night before ; and now, as Orde seemed to like it, another had to be got ready for herself ; and a second breakfast prepared at nine



o'clock, for, as usual, she and the boys took theirs at seven, directly the milking was finished with.

Mrs. Platt had returned late the night before : and with a new sense of cowardice Lu had put off seeing her till the morning. But then a sort of explanation had to be decided on, which Orde's evident age and illness made easy. Indeed she was amazed to find that it apparently never entered the good woman's head to regard him as anything more than an old family friend, and hoped that others might take the same view ; while she gradually realized that David's intense likeness to his father lay more in what she remembered him to be, than in what he actually was at that time.

The interview with the surgeon was disastrous. Orde's hopes had risen high in the clear morning air of Beechleigh, and he absolutely refused to believe the verdict, which tallied in every respect with that of the London doctor. The disease was unmistakable. An operation might possibly prolong life ; but it was doubtful and the risk would be great.

Disregarding the warning, Orde deliberately seized on the word " operation " only, and tore it to bits. He had been wrong to go to a surgeon. Why had Lu taken him there ? Of course all the man wanted was a chance to get his knife into him : to hack him to pieces : to practise his horrible trade upon him.

Half weeping with rage and disappointment he dragged Lu off—almost before she had time to tender her guineas—and they scoured Collins' Street for doctors ; ringing at door after door, only to be met by the news that there was no one at home : that it was not the hour for consultations, unless by appointment.

At last, in one of the suburbs, they did find a general practitioner—who hummed and hawed ; evidently fearful of committing himself, till Lu mentioned the great surgeon's name ; then, with unmistakable relief, agreed with all that he had said.

By the time they at last made their way to the station the weather had broken, and it was pouring with rain ; the streets a sea of mud, the shops and offices disgorging a crowd of jostling people, among whom Orde pushed his way, in a state of hysterical exasperation, for his strength was nearly at an end.

At the station itself the crowd was even worse, a maze of dripping umbrellas and mackintoshes. With a fretful movement Orde plucked Lu by the sleeve ; dragging her back from where she stood, waiting in stolid patience, at the end of the long line outside the ticket office.

" Why not go up by taxi ? It will be horrible by train : all these wet, smelly people ? "

With a sense of relief, a sudden acknowledgment of his superior wisdom—which was almost like the old times—Lu splashed out into the wet street, hailed a passing taxi, and they drove up the long ten miles to Beechleigh ; Orde leaning heavily against her shoulder, encircled by her arm, groaning at every jolt.

Once home there was no time to see to David, to insist on his preparing the lessons which he had brought back from school—in a temper because Lu had forgotten to give him a note excusing the morning's absence.

Mrs. Platt had supper ready. But it was cold before Lu could sit down to it ; for Orde had to be helped to bed among hot-water bottles, a fire lighted in his room, and his meal seen to ; while he would tolerate no service from any hands but hers, declaring that the others were noisy and rough ; shrinking and crying out, ostentiously, at every sound.

" Like that there old man of the sea, we hears of in scripture ; " growled Mrs. Platt, with a curious confusion of literary origins, as Lu at last sat down listlessly to the table. " Don't you be eating that muck. I'll fry you a couple of eggs and make some fresh tea in a brace of shakes. The scones 'ave all sat down on me, past praying for. ' Binding burdens on us grievous to be borne ; ' I calls it," she went on, her monotonous undertone keeping time to the frizzling of eggs in the pan. " As if you hadn't enough on your hands already."

" It's a'right, Platty."

" A'right is it ? Talk o' visitin' the sins o' the fathers on the children ! It ain't nothing to their relations an' friends. There now, you drink that there tea and get some colour into your cheeks ; an empty belly's a poor comforter."

" It's time David went to bed ; has he done his lessons ? "

" No, he ain't. And it won't not 'urt 'im neither ; let 'im get 'is licking to-morrow, he's spoiling for it, then we'll have some peace ; I'm pretty well full up o' fretty children."

There were innumerable things to be done, to be seen to. But, supper over, Lu still sat with her arms leant over the table, lacking the strength or spirit even to push her chair round to the fire ; while Mrs. Platt cleared away the dishes, brought in the wood for the next morning, and, after a while, managed to coax David off to bed.

Lu was tired out body and mind ; it was as if someone had taken her and wrung her dry of all feeling and strength. And yet, according to her standard of work, she had done nothing since early morning ; leaving Mrs. Platt to grapple with the house-work unaided : getting back too late for the milking : even forgetting to ask Cheiko if he had seen to the separator.

With a sudden clear flash of memory, she recollected that, the night before, she had simply put the milk down in the dairy without even asking the others to see to it : that it was Saturday, and cleaning-day : that she had intended to give one of the horses a ball. And lastly, that she had actually allowed David to go to bed without saying good-night to him, without a single kiss.

Filled with remorse, certain that he would be lying awake—as unhappy as she herself would have been under similar circumstances—she hurried into his room, and found him sleeping peacefully, with the expression of a seraph, one hand flung above his head, the other laid, palm uppermost, outside the counterpane.

After lingering a little to straighten the room, and bend over the boy, half hoping that he might awake and clasp his arms round her neck, Lu returned to the kitchen ; and finding Cheiko by the fire, and Hugh with a little pile of books and papers sitting patiently waiting at the table, remembered again that it was Saturday night : the time when she went through the accounts, adding up all the profits, and deducting the expenditure of the week.

“ Leave it for to-night if you’re tired ; Monday will do quite as well. Mother—leave it, you’re tired out.” Hugh’s face flushed as he used the unfamiliar word, looking up at her in tender concern. And with a feeling of inexpressible comfort, recognizing his meaning, his desire to please and help, Lu sat down by the boy’s side, and leant her face against his shoulder. All the day she seemed to have been giving :

draining herself of vitality, of sympathy and strength : here at last was someone who gave instead of taking.

Cheiko, who sat by the fire with a little bundle of sticks on his knees, adding a few last notches, his brows knitted over his calculations—for the little man could neither read nor write ; and, being responsible for all that concerned the pigs and poultry, kept his accounts by means of tally-sticks—looked up and grinned.

“ David’s in a fury of jealousy.”

Lu raised her head and stared in amazement :—“ Jealous—how ? Of whom ? ”

“ This morning of his place with the Stranger—this evening of his place with you.” To the time of Orde’s death Cheiko never spoke of him as anything but “ the Stranger : ” and to Lu’s mind the name held a curious depth of truth.

“ That’s nonsense : David knows what he is to me. As for the man—why should he count ? ” With a sudden flash of resentment and suspicion Lu looked round at the two.

“ You’re jealous yourself, Cheiko : ” taunted Hugh.

“ I’m not jealous. But if he makes her unhappy—takes her from us, I’ll kill him : ” said the dwarf.

“ Stick him with tally-sticks, till he looks like St. Sebastian in the picture : ” laughed Hugh.

“ Be quiet, both of you ! And bring your sticks here, Cheiko : we’ll see to you first.”

The evening’s work progressed slowly : Mrs. Platt’s household accounts were even more entangled than usual ; and Lu’s brain felt numbed ; while Hugh was exasperatingly painstaking and slow.

At last however it was at an end : all excepting her personal accounts, for the most part ridiculously small, which were added to the general expenditure.

For a moment Lu hesitated ; as ashamed as though she had been spending money on her own pleasure. Then, determined that there should be as few secrets as possible to poison the confidence of the little community, she pushed forward a scrap of paper on which she had jotted down that day’s expenses.

Between the fees to the doctor and surgeon : the cost of the taxi ; and several purchases she had made for Orde’s comfort, she had spent over seven pounds ; which Hugh added to the



accounts without a word of comment ; though it was more than had been spent over the entire household and farm during the week.

Lu did not grudge the money ; or for a single moment, regret what she had done. But, for all that, the thought of it weighed heavily upon her mind. During her professional career she had earned what seemed, to her, a vast sum : but she had never been able to take money lightly, merely as a pleasant vehicle of life ; easily made and easily spent. The thrifty peasant strain was too deeply ingrained in her nature.

Besides, she recognized the want of money as a slave-driver which rendered life sordid and disgraceful : which nipped every generous impulse in the bud ; even every feeling for personal nicety and cleanliness—for soap cost money, hot water needed fuel ; while shiftiness and untruth, all mean unlovely ways, were inevitably bred of poverty, of the fearful dependence on others, the fear of causing offence, which it evoked.

During her most prosperous days Lu would commit some great extravagance with a feeling of reckless delight ; but she could never bring herself to a consistently extravagant way of living. Time after time, in the days to come, Orde taunted her with meanness ; but the care of the pence had bitten too deeply into her nature for spending to come easy.

Besides this, her earnings had only been excessive during the last four years of her stage career ; and her expenses had been heavy. Daisy's debts alone had amounted to a considerable sum, while she was bent on paying off what she owed on the farm as quickly as possible ; and had sold most of her shares, only holding on to the " Silver Star ;" which, after a heavy drop, were again mounting, though slowly.

Thus there was, actually very little money that she could touch, save what came in weekly from the milk and butter, with which it had been her pride to cover all living expenses ; excepting extra lessons for David, and a special course in mathematics for which Hugh went to town twice each week, and worked evening after evening in the farm kitchen, till near midnight, when all his other duties were at an end.

It was a hard austere life for all of them. But it was beautiful by reason of its very cleanliness and order, the sense of independence it evoked. To Lu it was real, as the years

spent in town had never been. Perhaps Hugh worked harder than any of them; but though she realized this, she was shrewd enough to realize also, that hard work was a beneficial check to the dreamy and sentimental vein in the boy's nature. That he was as forward in his studies by merely devoting the evenings and winter months to them, as any student of his own age who had no other duties; and, at the same time, infinitely saner and healthier.

And now, into this quiet, calm world, Orde had swept like a hot wind; over stimulating, sapping. Already a sense of strain oppressed the whole household.

His sudden passion for David seemed as if it might be something to hold by. Lu was bitterly jealous: but she was more jealous for the child than of Orde. She had watched him all day: with the boy, with the doctor and with Cheiko—where the antagonism was mutual. But she could be sure of nothing: felt as if she was holding water in her hands.

Would he suck David dry of his affection, of all his freshness and newness: then throw him aside? She could never forgive him if he did.

On the way down to town: coming home in the taxi: all the time that she was attending to him, in and out of his room, he had talked of David—as he once talked of Win. As far as she herself was concerned it was abundantly evident that he would not have remembered her, save for her brief notoriety. All the small tender things with which a woman enriches the memory of her love, were lost to him. He had merely returned to the country which had always brought him health, and some measure of peace; then, finding it fail him, in a state of panic had sought her out.

Sitting up in bed, with her hands clasped round her knees, Lu tried to straighten out his character: to find one spot on which she could put her finger and say: "This is the real man."

But it was as though she had dreamt all her life of a treasure casket, then awakened to find it an empty box; and the sense of failure, of waste, was such anguish that the difficult tears streamed slowly down her face.

## CHAPTER XXXIX

FOR a while everything went so smoothly that Lu hoped life might once again settle down into its old, unemotional groove. It was difficult to say how much Orde suffered : that he did suffer was very evident ; that he slept little and restlessly, for she got into the habit of lying awake listening ; and then, if she heard him stirring—between two and three in the morning—getting up to make him a cup of tea ; after which he would often drop off to sleep, more than once still holding her hand as she sat by his bed.

But it was impossible not to realize that he was never awake or in pain without making her aware of it : that on the whole he slept more than she did, with the help of a narcotic which the doctor had given him ; while—if he felt himself neglected in any way—he used his sufferings remorselessly, in an appeal for her entire attention.

Through it all she was as patient with him as though he was a child ; while the demands he made upon her time and sympathy gradually helped her to forget, both her old passion, the revulsion of feeling which had overcome her on again meeting him ; with the sudden realization of all she had suffered, had lost, at his hands. He was simply a different person to what she had imagined, seeming to bear no relation whatever to any former period of her life. For women have a curious aptitude for re-creating the objects of their care, or affection ; and many a man, who might have otherwise disillusioned his wife beyond all hope, is redeemed by finding his rôle transformed from that of the lover to that of the child.

After Orde had been at the farm for close on a month, however, Lu received a rude awakening. His disease seemed to have reached a stationary point. The quiet, regular life and simple food had benefited his general health, so that he grew restless : took to going to town for the afternoon, returning dragged out and irritable ; or, far better, wandering about the heath-land ; and mounting the rise, which now represented a clean sweep of carefully harrowed, brown soil, the pride of Hugh's life ; clear of any weed, almost of any

stone ; already sown and presenting, in its quiet smoothness, an emblem of promise.

" By the time the lucerne is breast high I will have passed my matric," the boy said : and felt that the memory of all he had been learning at that time would, for ever, be accompanied by a breath of salt air, and the clean smell of the earth.

It was a wild, wet winter, with sweeping sea winds. David was still going to school regularly ; and Hugh so often at his classes that all the milking fell to Lu ; for Cheiko was kept busy with his own special charges ; while the days were so crowded, so packed with work, and broken by the long intervals of exasperating idleness which Orde demanded of her, that often enough it was already dark by the time she set out to call the cows home ; or else thick with fog ; and she would come in from the sheds glowing, her cheeks flushed, her hair shining with damp : so vigorous that Orde, from his chair by the fire, would stare at her hungrily ; as if he wished to renew his own failing life with hers.

One evening the cows were on the rough downward slope of common-land beyond the new paddock ; and as she skirted the edge of the freshly-sown plough Lu heard Orde calling after her.

" Wait for me—I'll come and help you."

" It is too far—and damp and cold ! You ought to be indoors."

" You keep me in cotton wool—you make me ill. I must have freedom, work and movement : " the words came in a gasp as he joined her. " By God, I'm tired of it ! Can endure it no longer : " he went on, as he regained his breath, and they began to move upwards again, side by side. " Those confounded doctors ! They half made me believe life was at an end. ' Why should a man whose blood is warm within him sit like his grandsire carved in alabaster ? ' " And he laughed excitedly, as he slipped his hand into Lu's arm, and ran it along the smooth skin ; for her sleeves were turned up, high above the elbow.

" My blood's warm enough still ; eh, Diana of the Uplands ? "

Thinking of nothing but his weakness, Lu flung her arm about his shoulder, to help him up the hill.



"Perhaps after all the air won't do you no harm ; you've been indoors all day, and up a' top it's like life."

"Like the Ranges—only the smell of the gum leaves missing. And youth—our golden youth, Lu. What's that white below us ?" He went on, for they had reached the brow of the hill.

"It's the mist and cloud hung above the sea. Touch your lips with your tongue, and you'll feel it all salt : that's why the cows love the grass along this side."

"From your lips instead !" With a sudden, heavy strength Orde flung his arm round Lu's neck, turned her face to his, with one palm pressed against her cheek, and kissed her again and again, full on the mouth ; biting at her lips with something more like a fury of greed than love.

"Stop it ! How dare you ! It's horrible—too horrible !" panted Lu, sick with disgust : for it seemed as if Orde was possessing her : was all animal, as Jake had been ; as if no single part of her person was free from his touch. That with those kisses the very last illusion which remained to her was gone for ever ; while his strength was so amazing that she wondered if his whole illness had been a mere pose, and imposition on her kindness.

At last she was free, and stood pushing him back, with her hands upon his chest.

"Let be—have you no decency ? Let be, I say !"

"What do you mean ?" Orde was shaking now, panting as she was ; but for all that his tone held frank amazement.

"If you are ill—if it isn't all a pretence——"

"Good God, you women ! Do you think that illness unsexes a man ?"

"Would anything—death itself ?"

"What have you to complain of ? I love you, have always loved you." Orde's tone was sullen. "You've led me on : let me kiss you before, since I came back—now you make a fuss."

He spoke truly. That first night he had kissed her on the cheek, and more than once since, in return for some service. But there had been no kisses like these which still burnt upon her lips : "It was all different," she protested.

"Different ! How different ? You have let me make love

to you—you told me you forgave me. Damn it all ! what does forgiveness mean with you women ?”

“ I suppose it means they don’t care any more—not in that way.” Lu’s voice was flat and tired ; her whole attitude full of infinite dejection, as she stood leaning a little to one side.

“ How can you expect anyone to understand you ?” insisted Orde petulantly.

“ Don’t you see—know. If I loved you I’d love you like I did before—like a blind mad thing ; or I’d hate you. But it has all been different. You were ill and I was sorry for you—sorry that my love was all gone : that you’d never really lived. Oh, don’t you understand—it didn’t even hurt me to have you here ; ’cause you were a stranger. The man I loved was not dead, couldn’t be mourned for—had simply never lived ; what I loved was someone greater and wiser than you’d ever been—or any man : an’ it seemed as though I’d sort of wronged you. I was kind because I was sorry——”

“ For a wreck ; for an old man not worth considering, an object of charity !” said Orde bitterly.

“ No—because when I saw you again I knew there was nothing : that it was not your fault.” Lu’s words had come slowly, in the monotonous tone of a child trying to puzzle out a difficult lesson ; but now her voice warmed with a sudden passion. “ Do you understand women so little, after all, Julian Orde, not to know how hard—how cruel—I’d have been if I still loved you : felt the wound you gave me still smarting ?”

“ But there’s the future—I’m better already, I know I’m better. Give me a full complete man’s life, here with you and the boy, and I’ll be whole again. And it shall be different. Lu, I swear it shall be different, the real thing. I’ve learnt my lesson, see life clearer. Only don’t starve me with cold charity.” The words came hotly, and leaning toward her, Orde caught at her arm, drew it up against his lips. “ Lu ; you weren’t made for this life, this half life. Let’s share it between us : take it as a whole—the fulness and beauty of it, while there’s still time. Start all over again, you and I.”

“ A few weeks ago the boy was all you wanted. You have him bound to you. He scarce looks at me, is all for you ;

calls your name the moment he is from school :—‘ Us men,’ he says. Now you want me too : I’ll not have it.”

Lu’s voice rose harshly as she pushed away from him, for Orde’s words had aroused the old sense of antagonism : he had taken Dave, her greatest treasure, as he had taken all else ; and now was already wearied, stretching out his hand for more.

“ I’ll not have it, I tell you ! My life’s my own. You’ve taken my boy. I daren’t even ask him what he knows : look him in the face, for fear of finding another reason not to trust you. But I’ll keep my life. ‘ Make it afresh !’ you say ! I’ve made it afresh, in spite of you.”

“ There’s love ; you can’t cut that out, and I love you.”

“ Love ! Do you know what your love is, Julian Orde ? It’s like the love of the vampires up along the Ranges ; it’s greed an’ gluttony, feeding on other folks’ lives. Think of anything. Think of the God, as you name so pertly in these days ; o’ the grave, o’ worms, it ’ud be cleaner than love from such as you.”

“ Brutal——”

“ I need be brutal.”

“ That’s what comes of caring for, giving a thought to a woman of the people.”

“ You’re right there—a woman o’ the people.”

“ A drab of a farm girl, saved from starving and worse. A painted dancing woman, with a list of lovers as long as my arm. But they’ve all left you as I’ll do.” Orde’s voice was shrill with rage and hurt vanity :—“ As I’ll do, I say ! For I’ll have no more of it. You and your brat ! Anyone’s, no one’s child ; that I, fool as I was, thought to father, to care for.” The words broke in a sob of self pity : then he burst forth again. “ It seems my fate to be put upon, deceived. But it’s at an end. I’ll go away to-night. I’ll never see you again, touch your hand, come near you. You and your dwarf and that white-faced boy ! You’ve done for yourself : you’ll never find anyone to love you as I have. Coarse—incapable of gratitude ! I was a fool to leave my own world again, to hope—but this is past bearing, the end of it all !”

He was stumbling down the hillside as he spoke, and running after him Lu touched his elbow :

"Wait for me till I get the cows ; you can't go by yourself. You'll miss your way in the fog."

"Go away !" Orde's voice rose to a cracked scream : "go away ! I'll have no more of you."

For a moment Lu hesitated, watched him till he was lost in the mist and darkness. Then, with a curious feeling of blank indifference, turned, and moving in the opposite direction, with the furze catching against her knees, tearing her back at every step, called the cows : heard their answering low : pushed forward a few yards and met them suddenly, looming unnaturally large out of the fog. Called again, and pressed up the hill knowing that they would follow.

It had all taken some time and Lu felt no surprise at not passing Orde on her way to the sheds : he would be home almost before she had topped the rise again ; while the edge of the plough was so familiar to her, the very feel of it beneath her feet so different to the rest of the rough ground, that she could scarcely imagine anyone missing their way ; for to skirt the border of it, and cross the one field to the house, cutting acrossways from corner to corner, appeared simple beyond words.

As in the old days Orde's emotional outburst seemed to have shaken her to the very foundation of her being ; sapping her vitality, leaving her for the time being, past all thought or feeling. Thus it was that she had scarcely given him another thought, till—just as she was milking the last of the cows—David burst impetuously into the shed.

"Mother ! has he gone to town ? I've been back from school—waiting for hours. We were going to play chess. Where is he ?"

"Who ?"

"Who ! Who ! Why the man of course ; Mr. Orde !"

"I don't know."

Frantic with impatience the boy shook himself, stamping his foot. "Mother ! you must know whether he's gone out ; you must know ! If he's gone to town I'll go and meet him at the station."

"He's not gone to town. Steady now, Polly !" Lu rose stiffly : wiped her hands on her apron, drew her full bucket from under the cow, and kicked the stool to one side. "Out of the way, Dave, an' let me get the other pail." She spoke



slowly and indifferently, too tired to grasp the fact that Orde had not yet returned.

"Mother! You're too bad! Where is he then? Is it a trick? Hugh's at his class. There's only Platty in the house."

"But he must be there."

"He's not there! I tell you; he's not there!"

"He was up along the hill with me."

"Where?"

"A' top of the plough: before I got the cows."

"Well, did he come home with you? Mother, have you gone stupid? Why can't you answer me?" The boy caught at her arm and shook it: "It's black with mist and darkness, I could scarcely find my way. He may be lost. He may have gone down the wrong side—walked into the sea."

"Eight miles! It's likely." Lu's wits returned, as the boy's voice rose, loud with fear.

"He may be lost—you don't care, you care for nobody. He may be dead for all you know!"

"Be quiet! Run into the house and ask Mrs. Platt if she's seen him, while I take the milk to the dairy."

The significance of David's words had at last pierced Lu's mind. It was more than an hour, getting on for two, since she had seen Orde. Once he had been a fine bushman, but since his return—with a mind dulled by the constant use of drugs—his sense of locality had completely failed him, as she noticed again and again.

Putting her pails hastily down on the dairy floor Lu ran to Cheiko, who she heard busied over his pigs.

"Cheiko, have you seen anything of Mr. Orde? He left me on the hill, near two hours ago."

"The stranger? No—" answered the little man, then went on, though, whether he spoke of Orde or the pigs, Lu could not say: "Look now; there's no satisfying some beasts. The more you give 'em, the more they cry for: always breaking through into the next paddock—never content."

At that moment David came running back. "He's not there; Platty's not seen him since four o'clock."

"Go to his room, see if his things have gone."

"I've been, I tell you! Platty was in the kitchen all the time baking; she'd have seen him. He's dead, I say—he's

fallen down in the darkness and died, out there alone on the hill. You were a beast to leave him, mother, I hate you ! To leave him like that—alone when he was ill !” cried the boy. And ended in a passion of tears.

“ Go to the stable, Cheiko, and get your lantern. I’ll fetch mine from the kitchen, and some brandy. Oh, there you are, Hugh, thank goodness !”

“ What’s wrong ? Stop that noise, David !”

“ Mr. Orde was up on the hill at dusk, and he hasn’t come back.” Lu had moved towards the kitchen as she spoke, and reached her lantern down from a nail. “ Give me the matches, Platty. And put hot water bottles in Mr. Orde’s bed. Hugh, get the brandy out of the cupboard. Now, you go with Cheiko—keep to the south side of the plough, and I’ll go north.”

“ Cheiko and I’ll go either side—you stay at home—he’ll be all right ; he can’t have got far in this time.”

“ No, I can’t stay still—besides Cheiko wouldn’t look properly, he hates Mr. Orde ; go and see what he’s about now, Hugh. Get the lantern—there’s no light in the stable. Yes, Dave, you can come with me, if you’ll behave—not be a baby.”

At the stables there was a check ; for both Cheiko and his lantern had disappeared, and a fresh one had to be groped for in the cow-shed, then fitted with a new candle. But at last they started, the two lights running parallel up either side of the plough for a while ; then diverging north and south as the brow of the hill was reached.

Just as Lu began the descent, flashing the light of her lantern to either side, with David sobbing at her heels, she heard a masculine voice hail her from halfway up the slope and ran back ; almost hoping it was Orde.

But it proved to be Martin Brandt, who had broken a journey to town on pretence of business with old MacIrvine ; and looking in to see Lu on his way from the station, heard of what had occurred from Mrs. Platt, and followed the lights ; catching up with Hugh first, then cutting across to the other two.

“ He’s lost—he’ll be dead. He’s awfully ill !” cried David incoherently : “ Mother left him up here alone—and he’s never come back. It’s her fault if he’s dead.”

"Shut up! Give me that lantern, Lu; and get along home with the kid, I'll see to this."

"No I must go—I can't sit at home—you won't know——"

"My oath—do you think I never tracked a bushed man before? Get along home, woman; you'll be killing yourself trapesing about in all this wet stuff."

"Martin, please, I must come!" Lu gave up the lantern, but laid her arm entreatingly on his arm. "Martin, let me come—Dave's right, it was all my fault."

Raising the light Brandt flashed it for a moment in her face. "All right—but send the kid home; there's no knowing——" his voice dropped, and it flashed through Lu's mind that he feared Orde might be dead, and wished to spare the child.

"Go home, David: go home and help Mrs. Platt:" she commanded. But there was a want of decision in her voice of which the boy took instant advantage."

"I won't! It—it was all your fault—and now I'll find him."

"Get! Now then, do as you're told, and get. Double, quick sharp."

Brandt's tone was imperative; and half in amazement David turned, and began to move sulkily homewards.

"That boy's getting ruined, you'd better send him up to me for a spell. Now then——" and he moved forward; flashing the light from side to side and calling; while Lu followed in an agony of self-reproach. The doctors had told her Orde needed the utmost care, and this was how she had obeyed their directions. If he was dead she could never forgive herself—while David would never forgive her, of that she was certain; for there was an instinctive bond between the child and his father, which Lu had realized, and bitterly resented, since the first day that they met.

Her imagination piled up horror upon horror. It was not impossible that Orde might have wandered as far as the sea: might have gone mad from fear and pain.

The side of the hill curved in a wide semicircle; almost opposite to them she could see the light of Hugh's lantern, flickering from side to side, yet still moving steadily onward. It was evident that, so far, his search had been no more successful than theirs, and Lu caught at her companion's arm, for the mere comfort of human contact.

"You'd best go back, woman:" Brandt ceased his shouting for a moment and leant towards her.

"I can't. Didn't you hear what Dave said—he was right. It was all my fault; if anything happens I can never forgive myself."

"Your fault!" Brandt's voice was incredulous.

"Yes, I was brutal to him—said things I hadn't no right to."

"What did he do, anyhow? You don't make me believe you rounded on him for nothing."

"It was nothing—I had no right to be angry; men are different—one forgets. I—what's that?" her overstrained nerves showed in the quick rise of her voice. The next moment, however, she drew a sharp breath of disappointment; for it was only Hugh, whose path had twisted till it converged with theirs.

"There's nothing to be seen;" shouted the boy; then drew nearer. "We'd best go up to the township and get some more lanterns and men."

"I suppose so:" Brandt spoke reluctantly, for Lu's fears had communicated themselves to him. To give up and go back seemed an acknowledgment of the worst, and raising his lantern high he swung it round for one last look; then gave a shout of triumph, and ran forward followed by the others; for the light had fallen full on the hunched-up figure of a man, hurrying forward, with short scrambling steps, at a right angle to the direction in which they were moving.

Brandt reached him first; saw it was Orde and put a hand on his shoulder.

"Orde, thank God! Man, we thought you were lost! Then, with a shy man's horror of emotion, he began to laugh. "Not two miles from the homestead, and Lu here frightened out of her wits."

Lu had reached them by now and caught at Orde's arm.

"Julian—oh Julian, how frightened I've been. Julian! what is it?" she cried as he made no response, flinging her arm round his wet shoulder, stooping and looking into his face; to see that he was crying, weakly and desolately, like a lost child.

"Dear, lean upon me, it's all right, I'm here. Hugh, you have the flask, pour out a little brandy—there, there!"



And she held the little cup to the lips of the man whom she had repulsed so fiercely a few hours earlier : pressing him to her, croning over him.

"The pain—the pain was awful : " Orde's voice caught in a sob, then trailed wearily. " I missed my way ; the cold and darkness bewildered me. Lu, Lu, for God's sake don't throw me over—don't leave me again, whatever I do—say." And he caught at her arm, the tears running unabashed down his face.

" I go mad—I know I do, with the pain and the love of life. But I'm not fit to be alone : " he went on, his voice broken with self-pity. " God knows it won't be for long. How horribly the cold bites into me—and this cursed pain. There's no one left of them all—all those men and women, save you, Lu. Don't ever leave me—turn me down."

" No, Julian, no—never as long as we both live."

" Swear it."

" I swear it."

" There is no one but you—no one. All the others hate me. Sometimes I think that even David—Whose arm's that ? Brandt's ? you're a good fellow, Brandt. I think it might have been better if I'd never—but you see I'm done for—done for this time."

Somehow or other they got him home, and into the warm bed that was ready for him : clinging to Lu, weeping, complaining ; refusing nourishment from anyone but her ; till at last he dropped asleep, holding her hand, while she sat motionless in her wet clothes, till a restless movement released her ; when creeping softly across the room to replenish the fire, she turned to find Brandt at her side.

" For Heaven's sake go and get into some dry clothes. Do you know what the time is—after ten : you've been in here close on three hours. The others are off to bed, and I've kept your supper warm for you." He had been propelling her gently out of the door as he spoke, and now gave her a push in the direction of her own room. " You dear fool of a woman, when will you learn to care for others by caring for yourself. Get a move on you ; I'll have some hot cocoa ready by the time you've got into some dry togs."

A few moments later, moving slowly, for she was stiff with cold and fatigue, Lu entered the kitchen wrapped in a big

fur-lined coat, one of the few remnants of her dancing days ; and sitting in a low chair by the fire submitted to be ministered to by Brandt ; forced herself to eat, and drank the hot cocoa gratefully.

As she finished Brandt took the cup from her hand, placed it on the table. Then moved across to the fireplace, and turning confronted her, one arm on the mantelshelf.

"Look here, Lu ; I've sent all the others off, because I want a word with you about this man. How long's this going on. He's ill enough, and God knows, I'm sorry for him. But it will kill you : I never saw a woman so changed. Besides, it's not only his illness, he's eaten up with hysteria. To-night he was moving away from us. He half turned and saw me, then went on."

"It's a lie !"

"It's not. He was lost, right enough—I don't deny it : and in pain, frightened too, poor devil. But, his sense of the dramatic held. He did not mean to come to us. He plays upon your feeling—makes a corner in his sufferings."

"I shall think you're jealous." Lu tried to speak lightly.

"You may think what you like. My oath ! I *am* jealous of you, and for you, you're right there. You're wearing yourself to fiddlestrings over the man. He's come between you and David ; talked to him, told the boy things he had no right to. Cheiko hates him, has slipped off to bed because he daren't face you : was primitive enough to want to leave the fellow to die—Cheiko ! who wouldn't have hurt a fly. He's poisoning you all. As to money you've only to look at your accounts—it can't go on."

"Look here, Martin Brandt ! It's all no good. There's the price to be paid somehow." Lu's voice was flat with intense fatigue. "God knows it's not that I've done too much—I've not done enough—given enough, that's the mistake. I've made a religion of my love ; an' now you think that's all it's worth, to turn round on him now he's ill, dying and helpless."

"I don't want you to turn round on him—but there's other ways, other places. I'm sorry for the man—I'd do anything for him. But—well I love you, Lu."

"I don't want love—it's horrible to think of : nothing but desire, and passion and pain. Look at me ! The store I set

by my love ; and how has it stood ? I wanted to be the only one—though I could be ; then to fail a man because he is a man."

"Not because he is a man—but because he's that sort of man : because it was that sort of love."

"The only sort a'tween a man an' a woman. But there ! This remains. As long as he's alive his place is here, remember that. You others must go or stay ; there are things that have got to be borne—bitten upon. But my life, all that I can give goes to the bettering of him. Anything, everything—if only to make up."

"To make up for what ?"

With a gesture of intense weariness Lu turned her head, and laid her cheek against the back of the chair. "To make up—" she began : hesitated, then broke out passionately :—"Oh, Martin ; it's no good. You couldn't understand, no man could understand why a woman wants to make up to her lover, because her love's finished with—burnt out."

"But when a man has failed——"

"That makes no difference. It isn't his failure, it's her own that hurts. It's no good, Martin—I can never explain. But you must let me be, let me work it out in my own fashion. It sort o' seems to me that a woman must have given herself to any number of men—been blunted past all hurt ; if she don't feel that way."

"A damned silly way it seems to me, Lu. You women are never clear of the past—get all fogged up with it. But it's your way, and I'll do all I can to help ; take some of it off your shoulders. Plough up the land, while you're busy harrowing your own soul."

"You think I'm a fool."

"I thought you that the first time you refused to marry me. But I reckon I'm as bad—there's a pair of us. Now get off to bed—and—good-night old girl. You know what I think—though I bully you when you're not bullying me. You're white through and through, and some day I'll make good ; show you what love is. Do you hear, Lu ; my sort of love—not his—or yours either."

That very night the truth of, at least a part of, what Brandt said was brought home to Lu.

She had been sleeping with the heaviness of intense fatigue

when, some time between two and three, she heard Orde's voice calling her ; and, flinging on a cloak, went to find him awake and in pain : stayed with him awhile ; then slipped down to the kitchen to get him some tea.

Finding there was no wood, she was unbarring the open door, to go out and fetch some, when Hugh heard her and came to her help ; brought sticks and wood, and made her sit in the big chair while he kindled the fire and boiled the kettle.

The kitchen was flooded with clear moonlight by which she could have seen to read : and the creatures on the rug appeared to move between the white light of the moon and flickering, thin red flame. The hares went round and round and round on the crimson border : it seemed to her as if it was like life, never leading anywhere ; while the serpent with its one vigilant eye was like the all-indifferent, all-seeing Deity.

Hugh poked in some more twigs beneath the kettle : then sat back on his heels and gazed at her with sombre eyes.

" Is it to go on ?" Characteristically enough he made no reference to the past or to that evening : his whole inward gaze seemed bent on the future.

" Yes."

" I will do my best ; do all I can to help you."

" I know—my dear, my dear !" Lu leant forward and laid her cheek against his smooth dark head. Somehow it all seemed more than she could bear.

" But I'm frightened of Cheiko," went on the boy.

" Why ?" Lu raised herself in surprise.

" Well—you know he went away and hid to-night. He didn't want to go and look for Mr. Orde—didn't want him to be found. He seems to feel things deep down in him—gets all worked up. He says that ' he ' is your evil genius—that he's like a breath of plague. And, dear, you know nothing's been the same since he's been here——" Hugh broke off boyishly :—" he's so beastly clever : he knows so much : he doesn't seem to belong to us. Then, he's always sneering at Cheiko. An' Cheiko swears that he'll kill him if he stays here. Mother, he's set us all out of tune. I'm always thinking of him, wondering what he thinks of me—though I hate him, know he's a waster. Cheiko says that something must be done—a way be found."



"Hugh, you must tell him;" Lu spoke earnestly, with her hand on the boy's shoulder: "tell him that Mr. Orde was very, very good to me—and to someone I loved very dearly. Make him understand."

"Yes—" The boy spoke hesitatingly. Then, with the curious reticence which distinguished him, he changed the subject. "The kettle's boiling, I will make the tea: sit still, dear:" he said, and went deftly and quickly about his task: prepared a little tray and put it into her hands, as the sound of Orde's voice broke out calling her name.

"It's a bad thing, anyhow it's a bad thing:" he said. Then, as Lu went up the stairs in silence, turned to the fire and stood over it, brooding for a few moments, before turning to his room.

Cheiko was sitting up in bed; his shoulders hunched higher than usual, his hands pressed down on the mattress at either side of him.

"She was up—he had called her?"

Hugh nodded, and climbing into bed pulled the sheet over his head, for he was in no mood for talk.

Still he could not sleep, and it must have been fully an hour later, when he heard Cheiko say in a distinct matter-of-fact voice:—

"The man's got to be killed: that's the end of it—killed."

## CHAPTER XL

A NEW gentleness had come to Lu, born of suffering and disillusion, of the determination to meet every demand made upon her patience. But resignation and youth do not tread the same path, and it hurt Brandt, who had taken up his quarters at the MacIrvine's—leaving Harvey in a state of aggrieved triumph—to realize how much vitality had gone with those old bursts of impatient activity. For Lu was not yet thirty; though it seemed to her, at times, as if she had lived a hundred lives.

The thought of Orde obsessed the whole household. Even Hugh's sweet temper was warped; and the first disagreement he had ever had with Lu arose over the accounts one Saturday evening, when he accused her of spending too much of the

proceeds of the farm ; enslaving them all in the endeavour to satisfy Orde, whose demands seemed insatiable.

Lu's nerves were fretted with bad nights ; her more sensitive feelings dulled so, that by way of reply—too indifferent even to lose her temper—she did what she afterwards bitterly regretted, replied to the boy's accusations by confronting him in silence with a thick sheaf of receipts for his mother's debts.

" I apologize for all I have said." Hugh's face was white, his voice stiff and hard. And Lu, half inclined to think that he was indifferent, felt that a breach had opened between, which—as neither again spoke of the matter—was never completely bridged until, three years later, he brought her the whole sum, saved out of his own earnings ; when, in a passion of remorse and shame, she realized all that the boy must have suffered.

Cheiko also became more and more of a difficulty. Orde would sneer at him, tease him, and, in his more genial moods patronize him in a way that the little man, who, like all mis-shapen people was intensely vain, found intolerable.

Particular galling to one who had achieved pity and affection, but never love, from the other sex, were Orde's stories of his many conquests : accompanied by the proud boast :—" No woman has ever refused me anything." Indeed it was the bolstering up of this reputation which Lu believed to rule him in his rediscovered passion for herself. To prove himself to the very end : an affair more of vanity than of real desire : for ever since the day he was lost on the hill-side his dread disease had made devastating progress.

But of course, though Cheiko realized the exaction which claimed Lu's every thought, he could scarcely realize the piteous reason for it : while his ill-balanced humanity was at last so overcome by brooding jealousy that, missing the gun from over the mantelshelf one day, Lu had sought for him in a panic. And finding him cleaning it in the calves' pen, extorted the confession that he meant to shoot Orde : to creep into his room while he slept : to give him no chance to run or cry out.

Cheiko !—who as Brandt had said would not hurt a fly. So full of his purpose, so proud of his plan, so devoured by

jealousy and aversion, that—as he recounted it to Lu—he quite forgot to whom he was speaking.

“To shoot him—like vermin :” he said, his face expressing all that he felt ; so plainly that, even after he had been temporarily banished to Brandt’s farm, Lu could scarcely get the memory of it out of her head.

Mrs. Platt was changed too. Somehow Orde had got round her : spoken to her in a way that made her look dubiously at Lu—for the first time in her life.

But, above all this, was the fact that her son seemed lost to her. She had told Orde she would turn him out of the house, if he revealed himself to the boy. But now she could guess by the sudden silence which fell upon the two as she entered the room ; by the exchange of glances ; by David’s critical attitude towards herself, that he had been told : that he had weighed her in the balance against the weight of his father’s words, and found her wanting.

Curiously enough, though it hurt her deeply, Lu scarcely resented all this. She had grown morbid on the subject of self-sacrifice ; even rebelled against Brandt’s unmoved attitude. Her whole mind was bent on the thought of how she could add to Orde’s comfort : even rehearsing over to herself certain words she would say, things she would do ; as if it was some game, on every fresh move of which her whole life depended.

Still with that curiously clear-sighted astuteness which never quite forsook her, Lu realized—though she did not judge him one whit more hardly for it—that the man’s unrest, his persistent refusal to take “no” for an answer, was caused, not so much by his love for her, or her former rebuff, as by the desire to prove himself a conqueror once more. That the mere fact of her capitulation might bring him peace, both of mind and body.

One day she went into his room with a cup of broth to find him sitting by the window, a book in his hand—the little calf-bound “Ossian,” which had somehow survived all his wanderings.

“Do you remember ?” he held up the volume for her to see :—“but why need I ask ?” he went on peevishly. “I believe that your memory reflects everything as clearly as a looking-glass, and is as little touched by it. Lu !” and he

caught at her hand : " are you never going to forgive me, for the sake of those dear old days, with your heart as well as your mind ?"

" Julian, you know I've forgiven you long ago. What is it—what proof do you need ?"

" You—all of you and your love. To go away with you. You and I up among the Ranges again, away from all these people—this ceaseless domesticity. Lu ! say that you love me : kiss me as you used to do, you fierce green-eyed thing. Love—that's what I want. Love—to warm my hands at its fire, to gather life from it. The hot, wild love of the old days."

Lu had put the cup of broth on the table, and now stood leaning against the lintel of the window opposite to Orde, gazing down upon him ; noting his eagerness, the flush on his parchment-like cheeks, his trembling hands.

" Nothing can ever be the same again. That sort o' love's burnt out of me, with my youth. But if you like—if it 'ud make you any happier, Julian, I'll marry you—any time."

The words came slowly, and with infinite reluctance. Lu had no delusion on the score of any merely Platonic union with Orde. And she shrank, with a sense of actual repugnance, from the thought of giving herself, her clean, healthy person, into the hands of this man ; whose whole nature revealed itself in a stare of cynical amazement at her words.

The next moment, however, his face softened. " Lu ! what necessity can there be for any formalities between us two ? If there ever was a true marriage, surely it was that of ours among the Ranges."

" For me, yes." The thought of the long years which had intervened crossed Lu's mind. " But, still the fact remains—I'll marry you if it would make you any happier : be your wife—no other way."

" But it's folly—rank folly ! What have mummeries like that—all the paraphernalia of Church and State—to do with us, and our love ?"

" I'm thinking of David."

" My dear child— isn't it rather late for that ?"

Lu did not reply ; she was standing, looking out of the window, with her hands clasped lightly before her ; and leaning forward, Orde caught them in his. " Lu, let's be happy in our own way—show that you trust me."



"It would be very simple. No one need know." Lu spoke with a sort of dogged patience: "except just the boys, and ourselves, and one or two others:" she added, as her mind flew to Brandt. "But it's the only way."

"You don't love me."

"I offer myself to you."

"With infinite bargaining. What does it matter? Nothing will alter the boy's position—when I die I've nothing to leave. No, I didn't mean that—think you meant it. But, dear one, I do want this one proof of your trust—your love."

"And I want this one of yours." Lu spoke very gently; but there was a determination, a coldness in her voice, which Orde realized.

"Well, you can't have it! It's out of the question—I won't give up all my principles at the last. Why should you ask such a thing? It's beyond all reason!"

"Very well:" with a breath of relief Lu drew herself upright: "we won't talk of it any longer, Julian. Come now, drink your broth, it 'ull be cold."

But something of finality in her voice struck Orde, and he broke forth again. "Look here, Lu, it's out of the question—the whole idea of ceremonies—vows—is repulsive to me. Besides, to tell you the truth, I can't marry you, even if I wanted to."

"What do you mean?"

"That, as far as legal marriage goes, I'm done for: caught—hooked. It's got nothing to do with you. There was nothing in it to touch you—I swear it. Lu! you're not jealous? There was a row, it was in Portugal, I had to marry the woman. It was all as far removed from love, from our love, as the sky from the earth."

"When was it?"

"Oh, ages ago—four, five years. Lu—" Orde caught frantically at her gown as she turned to go. "If you knew all you would be sorry for me—pity me, Lu!" his voice rose shrilly. "You shan't go. I'll not be played with any longer. Whether you like it or not——"

"Julian! Loose go. I don't mind. It's all right"—with a sense of utter banality the only thought she could formulate rose to her lips—"there's the calves to feed: I must go."

"Damn you and your calves—you and your calves! good God! and you actually believed I'd marry you. You! with about as much mind as the cattle of the field. Marry you—you! Men don't marry women like you, let me tell you." Orde leant forward in his chair as he spoke, with his trembling hands gripping the arms, an ugly sight in his futile rage and weakness. "Marry you—after all there's been between us. Good God! what a *réchauffé*!"

"A' right:" with the old laconical rejoinder Lu pushed a little table nearer to Orde; took the cover from the bowl of soup; turned to gather up an armful of soiled towels and walked out of the room; all possible indignation at Orde's words outweighed by an infinite sense of relief. Once more she had risked her queen on the chess-board of life, and this time—mercifully enough—it had been refused.

## CHAPTER XLI

A FEW weeks later Brandt was sinking a new line of posts between Lu's property and the old MacIrvine's; where he spent much of his time: indeed there was talk of him taking over the farm when the old man, who was fading rapidly, should be past work.

Snatching an hour in the fresh air, while Orde was taking his morning sleep, Lu joined him and held the posts as he drove them home.

It was a cold bright winter's day; she had pulled one of Hugh's sweaters on over her print gown, and tied a scarf over her head which gave her a boyish look; while the keen wind whipped a colour into her face, that had grown sharpened and hollow-cheeked during the last three months.

Suddenly her spirits soared. She felt very far from the sick-room; almost young. It was so good to be in the open air: she loved the smell of the freshly cut wood, the intense blue of the far-away sky; the stretch of heathland, starred with innumerable tiny white blossoms: the sense of space; the freedom from walls and ceilings, which oppressed her as the forest had once done.

She liked Brandt's quiet slow boasting too: oddly enough he

had never boasted at all till he came in contact with Julian ; but she liked the human touch of it, the things he was so proud of. Long difficult journeys ; clearing land, breaking horses, tracking and snaring.

“ ‘ He,’ can set traps against any man—over a hundred a hour.” She could not have told why she said it : but the spirit of loyalty was strong in her.

Brandt meditated a moment :—“ Yes—maybe he’d best me there ; trap setting’s tricky work. But I’d take him on at splitting : I’ve split shingles, an’ pickets a thousand a day. I won’t deny there’s some could beat me ; but, my oath, it takes beating.”

He spoke in jerks as he hammered home the post. If the great mallet had slipped it would have broken Lu’s arm : she could feel the jar all through her as it was. But he was not the sort of man to let things slip.

And then it was, still in jerks, that Brandt again asked her to marry him : so characteristically that she felt no discomfort ; rather a warm sense of contentment that he still cared.

“ I’m not going to talk of love :” he said. “ I’ve got to believe that it’s not the thing to yapp about—it wants living. There was a chap, I once heard of, who was sinking posts along with the girl he wanted ; the same as we are. There wasn’t many words wasted. He started :—‘ Look here, suppose you and I get married.’ And all she said was ‘ A’ right :’ just as you might. Neither of them missed a stroke o’ work over it : an’ no more said till the day was fixed.”

Lu laughed, that clear ringing laugh which Brandt had not heard for months. Stood a little on one side and surveyed the post critically.

“ All the same you’ve drove it crooked, Martin Brandt.”

“ Look here, Lu, can’t you ? I’ll not ask anything ;” Brandt’s honest face flushed : “ not while he’s alive. Only to have the right to be with you : help you more than I can now.”

“ You help me through and through, dear man. If you knew what you are to me : the only one I seem to be able to hold to. But if ever—if ever things change—— You’re right, I don’t think that I could bear to talk o’ love again.”

“ A’ right !” said Brandt : then laughed at himself ; light-heartedly enough, for the acknowledgment that things even

might change was a distinct gain. And Lu laughed too, while they almost ran down the hill ; practical enough to remmember that it must be near dinner-time.

But before the house was reached she had flagged again. And the old strained look came back to her face as she found the others waiting, and started hurriedly to prepare Orde's tray.

However, just as she raised it, the door from the staircase opened ; and Julian himself, who had not been downstairs for over a week, appeared on the threshold : haggard and unshaven ; yet still wearing that curious air of distinction, which, with his well-cut clothes, marked him out as a creature apart from the other men.

At a glance from Lu, Hugh rose from his seat opposite the fire, and cleared a place ; while she arranged the things from off the tray ; not daring to hint that he should not have come, was taking any risk.

" Sit here, Julian, and I'll get you some wine."

" I'm glad to see you down again—I hope it means you are better," remarked Brandt.

Orde did not speak : he had sat down heavily in the chair offered him, and now leant back in it, drumming softly on the table with his fingers ; and looking slowly round at them all. Till his eyes rested on David ; when he smiled as winningly as though the boy had been a woman whom he wished to charm.

" You have been to school, my son ?" The phrase was so commonly used by anyone, to any boy, that it was impossible to take exception at it. But Lu who was bending over the fire winced.

David was not in a pliable mood, however. Orde had raged at him for some piece of carelessness only the day before ; and he had not forgotten it.

" If you stay at home from school this afternoon I will play you at chess."

" Not to-day, Julian," put in Lu quietly as she brought him his soup. " It's Saturday to-morrow, anyhow ; and he's missed so much ; then it's near the end of the term, and the examinations are next week. I'll play with you."

" You ! My dear Lu ; your brain is not of that calibre



which makes a chess-player. David is more like—well like a chess-player.”

“To-morrow then. He must go to school to-day. It’s time you were off, David, get your cap.” The fresh air had invigorated Lu; given her back some of her old decision and firmness: rendered her less susceptible to Orde’s moods than usual. For the most part she seemed to find it impossible to deny him any of the countless small exactions—which devoured her time, strength and sympathy—unless roused to actual anger: but now she spoke tranquilly.

“I say he’s to stay—and that’s the end of it!” Orde’s tone was childishly dogmatical.

“And I say he’s to go:” Lu had seated herself by this time and was eating her dinner; coolly enough though her cheek flushed at his words.

Mrs. Platt, opposite to her, gave a shrug:—“I can’t see where’s the sense of all this book learning. It won’t hurt the lad to miss a half-day at school. Why can’t you let him bide, Lu, if Mr. Orde’s set on it?”

David had got up as his mother spoke; and was moving round the table, towards the peg where his cap hung, when Orde tipped back his chair: caught him by the arm, and whispered. Then, as the boy stood sulkily aloof, smiled up in his face: whispered again and was answered by a nod.

With a curious expression on her face Lu watched the little scene; saw David move, rather aimlessly, cap in hand towards the stair, then glance back and raise his brows in Orde’s direction.

“Where are you going, David?” she asked.

“To fetch something.”

“Stay here. Do you hear me? Stay here. And you, Mrs. Platt, can clear the table.”

She spoke in the cold tone one might use to a strange servant; and for a moment the woman hesitated, staring. Then rose with a crimson face: and began gathering the dishes together. She had been put out of court; and nothing could have hurt her more; though somehow she respected Lu as, in spite of all her affection, she had never done before.

“Now look here, all of you.” Lu was leaning forward across the table, her arms folded upon it: her face white and set, the line of the sharpened jaw curiously defined.

"Once for all we've got to come to an end of this. You are all against each other, an' you're all against me; God only knows why. But someone's got to be given best, an' I reckon it's me. It's my house: it's got a door:" here she jerked her chin in that direction. "If you don't like it you can go back-slanging off where you like, an' when you like."

"But mind this. As long as you stay you've got to remember that I'm mistress here. I've worked for you, thought for you, an'—fool as I was—tried to stand well with you all. But I'm through with it. As for David I don't want him—I can do without him as well, better, nor he can do without me. He can go with Mr. Orde: you can all go—it's nothing to me. Nothing, do you hear? I don't feel that much for you—not that much:" her voice rose harshly, and she snapped her fingers as she spoke. "I'm done with feelings and affections—burnt out with 'em. Will be thankful to get free of you."

She had risen by now, and was leaning forward, her hands on the table, her eyes blazing. Brandt moved from his place and stood with his back to them all, gazing out of the window: but he felt the way she looked. For the very air seemed to vibrate with her passion, as it had done years before when she had flown at Nurse Wrench; though now it was the child himself who was the cause of all her anger and pain.

For Orde seemed to have dropped out of existence, and it was on David her eyes were bent: holding—as the boy realized, with an appalling sense of loss—no faintest trace of softness or affection, regarding him as though he were an absolute stranger; weighing him in the balance as though he had ceased to belong to her.

His own eyes were filled with tears, his lips trembling. But Lu merely gazed at him coldly for another moment. Then turned sharply round and walked out of the room.

They heard her go upstairs; and move about overhead. Then came the sound of the opening and shutting of drawers, while the boys stared at each other in silent dismay; and Mrs. Platt stood listening, a towering pile of plates in her hand, her round red face quivering

Suddenly Brandt flung round and stood surveying them;

swinging backwards and forwards on his heels ; his hands deep in his hip-pockets.

" My oath ! " he said :—" but you got it from the shoulder that time, an' you damned well deserved it, too. You—you, an' a woman like that ! By God, if any of you had the feelings of a louse you'd serve her kneeling."

Orde had moved over to the big winged chair before the fire, and sat huddled together in it, his eyes on the rug at his feet ; while a confused medley of thoughts ticked through his brain.

Would she turn him out ? Where was he to go ? How the old rug was fading, the snake hardly distinguishable from the leaves ! That brute at the farm to give her a cut lip ! How she had battled ! After all he had been the only one to care.

And then, clear as the cut of steel, for the first time came the realization of all that his caring had cost her ; of wounds far deeper than a mere cut lip.

He could hear David sobbing ; and the sound filled him with impatience. The boy was nothing to him ; touched nothing beyond the greed of possession, the delight in a new pose, a new feeling however transient. After all he could not feel, keep on feeling, as other people did. It was not his fault, everything slipped away from him—excepting this cursed pain. He was a cuckoo in the nest. Always had been—always would be ; or a stormy petrel.

His mind was suddenly absorbed in the question as to which bird he most resembled.

Then, for no reason, it all shifted ; and a couple of lines in " The Match " came back to him :

" If you were life, my darling,  
And I, your love, were death."

Yes, that was what he had been : death to her life.

All at once he was bitterly ashamed of himself. And most ashamed of all to know that his shame would not last.

Brandt had moved across the kitchen and now stood in front of him. " I want to tell you," he began, as though he was speaking to them all, though his eyes held Orde's.

" I've asked her to marry me every year, for eleven years. The first time when the boy was six months old. I asked her

again this morning : and she refused me again. I thought I might as well mention it :” his voice trailed in the slow drawl which overcame him when he felt anything intensely :— “ Not that I count on you driving her to change her mind : she’s not the sort to be driven. But because I kind o’ felt that way. An’ because—though I’m a white man as men go, I know this much, that I’m not fit to lick her boots. She’s bested you, got her hands on the reins, an’ I hope to God she’ll keep ’em. But I won’t let her forget, and I won’t let you forget neither, that I’m just waiting my time. An’ the worse you deal with her the sooner it’ll come.”

With that he was gone ; and again silence fell on the little group ; broken only by David’s sobs ; and the sound of Mrs. Platt sniffing.

Orde was miserably uneasy ; bitterly ashamed of the part he had played in connection with the boy. But for all that he found himself wishing the woman would put down her dishes and use her pocket-handkerchief ; and that David would be quiet : though at the same time Hugh’s silence exasperated him.

The next moment, however, they heard Lu descending the stairs ; with a curious brushing sound against the wall as though she was carrying something bulky.

The same thought crossed all their minds. “ Was she taking her things away : was she going ? ”

Then, as she pushed open the door with her foot, they saw that she was carrying the worn old trunk with which she had first toured the States ; blurred over with torn and soiled labels ; while, piled high, to her chin, was a heap of clothing ; not her own but David’s. A motley assortment, all his suits and underlinen ; the cricketing flannels she had been so proud of : shoes and caps. And, besides all these, the contents of a drawer in her own room ; long gowns of coarse calico, clumsily stitched : little woollen socks : his first pair of knickerbockers : a medley of broken toys ; at the sight of which Mrs. Platt’s face twitched afresh, and she broke into loud sobs.

Lu was very white, but her expression was absolutely indifferent as she tumbled her burden down upon the hearth-rug : then turned to David.

“ There you are : pack them, an’ be gone.”



"Mother ! mother !" The boy was across the kitchen ; and had flung himself upon her, so that she had to back against the table for support, as he clung to her sobbing : " Mother—Mother !" Nothing else, but Lu had her arms round him and was sobbing too : gathering back the wealth of love which she had strained after so hungrily during the past months.

Cheiko and Hugh slipped outside : and Mrs. Platt moved off to the scullery, the tears for which she could not spare a hand, still streaming down her face : resting in small shining pools upon her ample breast.

Only Orde was left ; feeling very old. Like a ghost, forgotten by all : a mere looker-on at life.

Even when the two drew apart he remained unnoticed ; watching them gather up the litter from the hearthrug, with a certain air of solemnity, and then go upstairs ; where he could hear them moving about opening and shutting drawers.

Presently David came down again : walking more sedately than usual, took his cap without a word, and went off to school.

Then Mrs. Platt came in, still sniffing. Swept up the crumbs, tidied the hearth and returned to her dishes.

The short winter's afternoon wore on. Twice Orde bestirred himself to put on fresh wood : and it was after four, when the sunshine was mellowing to a crimson glow, that Lu came quietly downstairs, crossed the room and bent over him.

" Julian, I think it is time you went upstairs. I'll fill the hot-water bottles : then you can have your tea in bed. You won't not sleep if you get too tired. "

Her eyes were still red with tears : but her face was transfigured with a sort of happiness which made Orde wonder if she had been praying. Women, particularly of that primitive type, were such curious creatures ; reverting easily to the old beliefs.

But she spoke so gently that it was evident that she bore him no grudge for what had passed that day. He had simply been forgotten ; and for once he experienced no resentment at the thought : though he was still sufficiently self-conscious to wonder why ; to feel a sort of glow at the contemplation of his own magnanimity.

For all that some unusual depth had been touched by his

sense of utter loneliness and apartness, and—perhaps above all—by Brandt's confession of faith.

For, as Lu helped him into bed, then bent over him to settle his pillow ; he caught at her hand.

" Green Eyes, I'm sorry."

For a moment she stared : and in that moment Orde plumbed the depths to which he had fallen. For she had not only momentarily forgotten him ; but entirely lost sight of the part he had played in the scene with David.

The next moment however, she had laid her hand caressingly against his cheek.

" It's all right : " she said—" it don't matter—now."

Suddenly the old whimsical smile twisted Orde's lips. " 'Pon my soul, I thought there was nothing new left for me in life. And now I've said I was sorry—for the first time ! Felt it too. But it won't last, Lu. Nothing lasts. Only remember—I have been sorry."

Five minutes later he heard her down in the kitchen, busy over the teacups : singing, or rather chanting, in her own fashion :

" If love were what the rose is——"

and gathered comfort from the sound.

That day, for the first time for years, the poem they both loved, had come back to him. His thoughts had always influenced hers : so sharply that in the past he had amused himself waiting for her pat expression of them. And now, among the ruins of life, it was some comfort, some salve to his pride, to find that this old influence still held.

## CHAPTER XLII

ORDE was dying. The thought cast a sense of solemnity over the little household, though no one spoke of it. Even David was subdued and Mrs. Platt's voice hushed ; for the shadow of death was palpable, hanging like thunder in the air ; bringing with it a sense of deep depression, and awed expectancy.

Only in the large front room on the upper floor—flooded

in spring sunshine, its white walls dappled with light and shade from a maple-tree against the window—the greatness of the issue at stake appeared still unrecognized.

During half a century Julian Orde had compassed all his desires, not so much by the tenacity of his purpose, as by the strength of his impulses ; and even now he found it impossible to believe that life should be eluding his grasp while he still desired it. For it seemed incredible that he—who had always been the one to go away and forget—should in his turn be forsaken.

The Beechleigh doctor had been with him half the night before—for the darkness brought doubts and fears—and twice that day ; while the timid little minister of the Christadelphian faith, into which David had been admitted twelve years earlier—had been received with grandeur, and an affectation of amusement. Though, through all his cynical questions and denials, the desire of conviction had been evident ; the longing for something to hold to. For Orde's newly-found belief in a Supreme Being was not sufficient ; and in his heart of hearts he craved for something more human and less remote—a Christ or Madonna, to whose feet he might cling.

As it was he bulwarked himself round with trivialities. It seemed as if he almost believed that he might talk Death down. A night nurse had been sent for a week earlier, but he would have none of her ; declaring that he needed nobody ; that they might quite well leave him alone. But as this was manifestly impossible, and as he refused to have Mrs. Platt in the room, the whole of the nursing had fallen upon Lu's shoulders. Nominally she was supposed to go to bed directly after early breakfast and sleep till dinner-time but she had to wait up to make Orde's bed, feed and wash him. Then there was the doctor's visit ; and by that time the morning had passed and she was still in the sick-room ; her brain reeling with the incessant stream of talk.

Brandt had taken up his quarters at the MacIrvine's, and he and Hugh, with Cheiko's help, managed all the work of the farm between them ; while Lu's rare hours of peace were those during which he sat with Orde, who had taken a curious jealous liking to the taciturn farmer, delighting to pit his own adventurous life against the other's quiet existence.

Through it all Brandt would sit in his characteristic atti-

tude, his large hands loosely clasped between his knees nodding acquiescence to all that the sick man said. For Orde now came under the same category as the other "poor things" with the care of which Daisy had so often twitted him. "If there ever was a spavined horse, or a dog blind of an eye. Tiny 'ud always be bound to take it over:" she had said.

The dappled light on the white wall grew deeper, tinged with a pinkish shade. Then the grey engulfed it and moved like a curtain across the room.

A thrush was singing outside the window, and leaning against a tree Lu listened to it: dully enough; conscious of little excepting an immense fatigue, and that curious sense of waiting which had oppressed her all day.

Suddenly Orde's voice broke away from the stream of reminiscence.

"It's getting dark and cold. For goodness' sake shut the windows and fetch a light. You know how I hate the darkness."

Lu lighted two candles, and set them on the mantelpiece, drew down the curtains and shut the windows; but even then he was not content.

"A half-light is worse than nothing, much worse—like everything half and half—neutral. Are there no more candles in the house?"

Orde was lying propped high upon his pillows. The injection the doctor had given him that afternoon, while it dulled the pain, seemed to have left his mind painfully alert, his nerves all on edge. "I can't understand such meanness;" he complained fretfully. "For God's sake get me some more light; let's look as if we were alive, for once. Do you hear me? More light—more—— No! That's no good!" he went on as she lighted the two remaining candles, his face flushed with excitement, his voice harsh and cracked.

"They're like pin-pricks in a piece of paper—all the rest dark. Only get them, I'll pay for them myself, if that's what you're thinking of."

"Lie still, Julian. Of course I'll get them, dear; as many as you like. Only be patient for a moment:" entreated Lu. And running down to the kitchen collected all the candles and candle-sticks she could lay hands upon.

"There is one in your bedroom, David, and one in Cheiko's;



get them. And you, Hugh, run up to the township for fresh candles. This is the last packet—he wants more light—will want it all night.”

“Why not a lamp?” suggested Brandt, who was helping Hugh with the accounts, for it was Saturday night.

“He won’t not have it, says it makes the room hot:” answered Lu; then caught Cheiko’s eyes fixed upon her face with a look of dog-like eagerness: and realized the little man’s desire to help in this last extremity. “Never mind, Hugh, Cheiko will go; two packets please, Cheiko?”

“Is Brandt there? Was that his voice?” demanded Orde, the moment Lu entered his room.

“Yes.”

“He seems to live here, has the fellow no home—no work of his own to attend to?” he inquired irritably: then changed his tone. “Tell him to come here. And David, where’s David? I never see him now, what pleasure can you find in keeping us apart?”

“He’s at his lessons.”

“Let him bring them here. Are those all the candles you have?”

“There’s eight, Cheiko’s gone for more.”

“All right—now call Brandt and the boy.”

Awed into silence, David brought his books, and sat down at a little table by Julian’s bed. But the boy could not keep his attention on his work, and it was evident that the face on the pillow fascinated him.

At the opposite side was Brandt, leaning forward with his eyes on the floor; for he scarcely dared look at Lu, whose attitude of intense fatigue—as she sat sideways on a high chair, one arm flung out along the foot-rail of the bed, her cheek pillowed upon it, her watchful eyes on Orde’s face—cut him to the heart.

The harsh voice ran on. Every now and then, as it cracked, Lu rose to administer a stimulant, or shake up the pillow; her benumbed mind incapable of any thought beyond the sick man’s immediate needs. For the time being there was no past and no future. No world excepting this one room, with its eight candles, each encircled by its own halo of misty light.

“You’ve never been to Europe, Brandt: never seen Paris—

and hope for Heaven ! What a life, to bank all on the future ! You should do as I've done, live in the present—an actual Paris before a possible Paradise. Life's so different there—franker, more above-board. Half the ugliness in the world comes from concealment—decency went out when clothes came in.

" I had a little mistress once—a milliner. No ! not that one, she was—oh, I forget, but her name was Clothilde. In England it would have been all furtive and sly—even other countries ; that wretched creature in Portugal who they tied me up to.

" Did you ever hear I was married ?—No ? Well, no one would think it, I don't look the part of a Benedict. But, believe me, in these days the French are the only people who have a light enough hand for love. It's like an omelette—needs to be the affair of a moment—piping hot—light as air.

" Lu ! Don't you see the candles are going out, and you must shut the window. Didn't I tell you to shut that window ? It's growing damnably cold. What was I talking of ? Oh, love ! That's the mistake we English make—confusing it with domesticity—imprisonment for life. There was a demi-mondaine I knew——" his voice was strangled in his throat, and moving forward Lu passed her arm beneath his head, and held a spoon to his lips.

" I've played the game," he went on, after a moment, to Brandt who had held him, while Lu arranged the pillows afresh. " But there, what is the game, tell me that. Even Lu there—she's a good woman mind you—spite of everything." For a moment the harsh voice softened. " Only one folly in her life—I ought to have known, guarded against it, but I wanted to believe. There you are ! What is the game, after all ? If she wished it had been played differently, she'd wish the boy unborn—and the boy——"

Orde hesitated, while a strange expression crept over his face, a compound of curiosity, vanity and triumph.

" Even Lu there, owes me something. David, look up at me, now——" Orde flung out his hand, palm uppermost in the direction of David ; then tapped his own chest. " Look at me ! Look at me, I say ! Brandt, do you guess—eh ?"

" I knew—all along."

"Lu told you." The dying man's voice was that of a spoilt child, whose surprise-packet has proved empty.

"No." Brandt spoke calmly, but for the first time his voice showed something of the contempt he felt, and Orde plucked disconsolately at the counterpane. Then, as Lu straightened herself, and moved across the room, a fresh thought struck him.

"You've seen her dance?"

Brandt nodded.

"It seems curious; one can hardly believe it. In that cotton gown—no style, no anything—that she was so talked of, thought of. I tell her, she ought to get some proper corsets, pull herself together——" again the voice, which had once been so full and rounded, broke sharply. For a moment Orde struggled for breath, then went on.

"So you've seen her dance. And I who inspired her, filled her with the spirit of it all—forgotten!"

For a while he lay silent, brooding. One by one the candles burnt low in their sockets. Lu had signed to David that he should go to bed; but Orde restrained him with a gesture. And now the boy slept, his arms folded on the table; his head pillowed upon them, turned a little sideways, one flushed cheek uppermost, while Brandt—tired out by a long day in the open air—was bent forward, nodding.

"Lu! I want to see you dance. Here! Now!" Orde's voice broke the silence, with a shrill note; at the sound of which Brandt sat upright, and stared; while David stirred sleepily, then buried his head deeper in his arms.

"Here, I say! Dance! Dance! I want to see you dance!"

"Hush! Julian—not now. You're ill. It 'ull be too much for you—perhaps to-morrow."

"To-morrow—what of to-morrow. Now! Dance now, I say—here. Wake up, Brandt! clear the room, and light some more candles. For God's sake light some more candles."

In his furious impatience Orde had dragged himself upright, clutching at the counterpane.

"All right." Half mechanically Lu moved towards the centre of the room.

"No! no!" Orde's voice rose to a shriek. "Not in

those boots—that gown ! As you used to dance to the other men—you’ve got the things.”

“ Yes.” With a woman’s curious instinct for hoarding mementoes Lu had kept the entire Columbine outfit, which she had worn at her last appearance : the silk tights and satin shoes, the tulle skirts ; and peaked bodice : even the boxes of powder and rouge, and patches—the tiny hearts and crescents.

“ Then put them on ; quick ! quick ! ”

For a moment Lu’s eyes met Brandt’s : then as he nodded she bent over the sick man, speaking very gently and firmly.

“ I will get them—wear them for you. But you must be very patient—lie still, they are all packed away in a box.”

Orde nodded, his brilliant eyes full on her face.

“ Martin will give you your drops if you need them. But you must keep quiet—save your strength.”

Again Orde nodded, while his eager gaze followed her as she slipped from the room : his whole expression, like that of a child on the threshold of life—the opposite threshold to that on which he stood—awaiting some promised treat.

Lu never forgot dressing that night. She was obliged to get Mrs. Platt to help drag the box from beneath a pile of others in the attic : to hold the candle while she found what she wanted : and finally, in her own room lace her into the long, pointed satin bodice.

At first sight, her own eyes—gazing back at her from the long glass—frightened her ; set in a white face ; crossed by a wavering mist of light, as the candle flickered in the old woman’s hand : and she daubed on the rouge recklessly, in hopes of producing something more human. Then was overcome by an hysterical desire to laugh at the sight of the grotesque figure—in the short pink flannelette nightgown, with the minute wisp of hair strained tightly from face and neck—which appeared upon the surface of the glass ; from under her raised arms as she pinned on her pink wreath ; above her shoulders as she stooped to draw on the long silk tights ; and arrange the sandals of the white satin slippers, with their scarlet heels ; and from side to side as the stiff old fingers fumbled with the laces.

The wind had risen, and flowing in from the open window guttered the wax down the side of the candle, billowing out the



white muslin curtains, in an absurd caricature of dancing figures ; beckoning to Lu to join them, curtseying, posturing, and filling the room with shadows ; while Mrs. Platt's voice ran on in a monotonous chorus of complaints.

" Did you ever ? Lord bless us and save us ! Did you ever know the likes of such goings on ? When a Christian man 'ud be at his prayers. Draw in a bit more my dear, you've put on flesh since this was made, an' if the pesky cord breaks—oh Lordy, Lordy—Lord——"

At last it was all over ; and running downstairs Lu opened the bedroom door ; saw Brandt bending over the sick man, spoon in hand ; caught his eye as he raised himself ; then, as her glance flew to the face on the pillow—realized that the end was near.

Orde's cheeks seemed to have sunk deeper : his mouth was a little open : his breath came in gasps. But his eyes were still bright ; his gesture held a nervous strength as he signed to Lu that she should begin : as manifestly intent on the fulfilment of the moment's desire as he had ever been.

But for a minute or two she hesitated, shivering. Orde had been right. It had grown very cold ; she felt as though she were stripped. She wanted to go away, to hide herself. It seemed like an insult to, a daring of Death, to confront him in such a costume. To actually dare to dance, in the very room where he stood waiting. Her feet felt heavy as lead upon the floor ! It was impossible that she could ever move. She was eaten up with shame for herself—for Orde : more ashamed than she had ever been, in all her life.

But at that moment Brandt—who was looking at her with a world of pity in his eyes—pursed up his mouth and began to whistle—the old tune of " Massa's gone away : " which he had picked up from hearing her hum it, years before, while she swept and dusted in the little Carlton villa. And half mechanically Lu sprang forward, throwing herself into the first delicate movement of the Columbine's dance, tip-toe on one foot, the other raised and pointed, with one arm above her head. Stood swaying for a moment and then began to dance : at first slowly ; gathering strength and sureness with every movement.

In spite of the closed window, the wind crept into the room, guttering the candles so that Brandt, still whistling, was

obliged to rise and move them out of the draught ; though even then they filled the room with drifting shadows ; amidst which Lu pirouetted and curtsied, darted and swayed with that eternal fixed smile which had grown upon her face—from which the reckless daubs of red stood out each moment more prominently.

At first she paused every few moments, to throw a glance of entreaty towards the bed ; hesitating, till Orde's gesture of command threw her forward once more.

But after a while it seemed as if something, even stronger than the sick man's will, urged her onward ; sweeping her like a leaf before the wind. As if her movements were beyond her own volition. For she danced as a creature possessed, every trace of that delicate reserve, which had once so characterized her, gone : darting and whirling with astonishing swiftness and abandonment : leaping forward with a force and energy which caught at Brandt's heart.

A curious feeling grew upon him that the mad dance would never cease. That the flickering candles : the gyrating mist of pink and white : the yellow face streaking the high pillows might grow to be part of his life. That Orde held them there in the hand with which he beat time upon the counterpane. And a savage wish grew up in his kindly heart that the man would make haste with his dying ; loose them all from the spell which held them—even David, who had been roused from his sleep and sat upright ; his face flushed, his tawny hair on end, his eyes, wide with amazement, fixed on his mother.

At last a step sounded on the stair, and the young doctor—who had found the outer door unlatched—crept into the room ; then stood, staring with amazement ; warned to silence by an imperative gesture of the sick man's hand.

The next moment, however, his eyes were on Lu, noting her terrible excitement, the way the sweat had gathered on her face and arms ; and leaning forward he sent a fierce whisper hissing across the bed to Brandt.

“ Stop that whistling ; you fool—stop it ! ”

There was a sibilant breath as Brandt parted his dry lips ; suddenly realizing that he himself was prolonging the very scene which he could have killed Orde to terminate. For the instant the sound ceased Lu came to a pause : her arms

straight at her side—her eyes vacant, like a marionette whose wires have been loosed—then swayed, as he ran forward and caught her in his arms.

“Encore ! encore !” The words came in a harsh cry, as Orde dragged himself upright : caught at a bunch of roses which stood upon the little table by his side and with a sudden spurt of strength hurled it towards Lu : sank back and drew his hand across his eyes.

“What, the curtain ? Didn’t you hear ?” the old note of peevish complaint crept into his voice—“it was an encore.”

“What’s that you say——? What ?” and he caught passionately at the doctor who leant over him.

“The end—you lie ! It’s only”—his words dragged slowly, though every one was clear—“only—only the entracte :” he stammered. Then, with this last confession of the immortality he had defied, Julian Orde dropped back heavily against the doctor’s arm. The confident smile of the man who knows, lost in the falling jaw.

THE END





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